HUMBER LIGHT RECONNAISSANCE CAR 1941–45

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ILLUSTRATED BY HENRY MORSHEAD

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DEDICATION

To all who fought in Humber LRCs, and especially to those who lost their lives in them.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 4

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT 5

- Humber Ironside (LRC Mk I)
- Special Ironside Saloon
- Humber LRC Mk II
- Humber LRC Mk III/IIIA
- Production totals and users

OPERATIONAL HISTORY 20

- The Mediterranean
- North-West Europe

OTHER USERS 45

- RAF Regiment
- Royal Navy
- Other Allied nations
- A Canadian cousin

BIBLIOGRAPHY 47

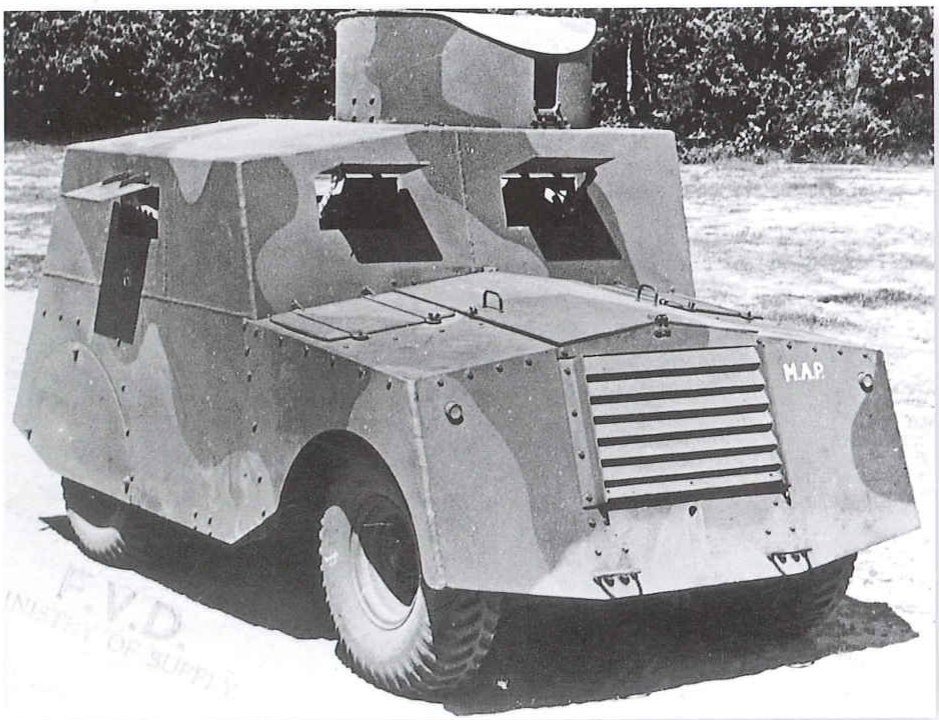
INDEX 48

HUMBER LIGHT RECONNAISSANCE CAR 1941–45

INTRODUCTION

There are few instances of a military vehicle becoming synonymous with a particular formation, but the Humber Light Reconnaissance Car (LRC) is one. In the course of World War II, the Humber LRC became associated so closely with the Reconnaissance Corps that it can justly be described as the Corps' iconic vehicle. And yet, in typically British fashion, the LRC was born out of happenstance in the wake of the Dunkirk disaster. Developed from an improvised design, it became the Corps' principal equipment and, although supplemented and gradually replaced by more modern vehicles, remained in service until the end of the war.

British industry produced a wide range of light armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs) for a variety of wartime roles, while many other similar vehicles were supplied by the United States for British use. Paradoxically, only one US light AFV used by Britain, the M8 Greyhound, was also used by the US Army. (Greyhound was the standard American light armoured car.) British practice,



Standard Beaverette III, one of the improvised AFVs of 1940. (TM: 439/C4)

however, paralleled that of other combatant nations, including Germany, which did not restrict armoured car production to a single design.

Among the many roles for armoured cars in British service was reconnaissance for infantry divisions, a task discharged traditionally by divisional cavalry regiments. Yet after Dunkirk it was considered that there were insufficient cavalry regiments to provide a reconnaissance unit for each infantry division as well as the armoured divisions. Therefore, the Bartholomew Committee, which investigated the performance of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France in 1940, recommended that an infantry Reconnaissance Corps be formed. With that recommendation accepted, the new corps was born in January 1941.

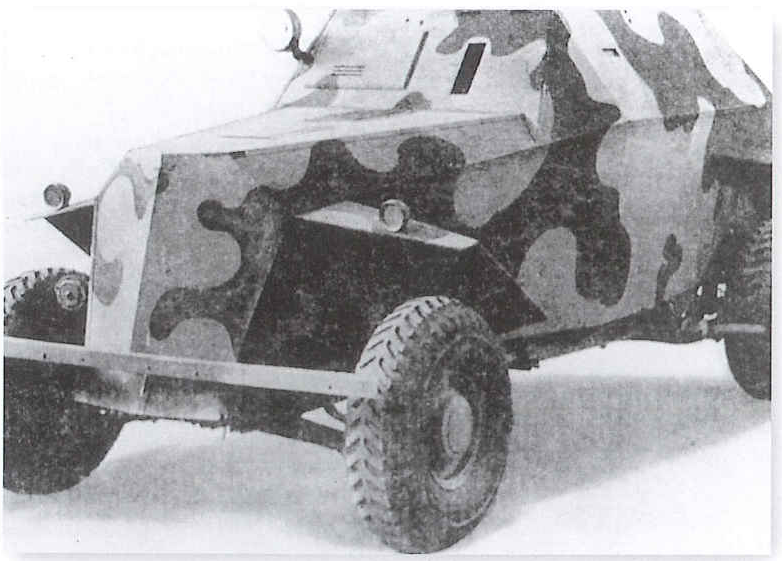
The Reconnaissance Corps' birth coincided with grave shortages of vehicles, equipment and weapons, much having been abandoned in France. Thus, initially, only one reconnaissance battalion per army corps could be formed, although the intention was that each operational division should have a battalion, a designation changed to regiment in June 1942. The dearth of AFVs led to the introduction of several extemporized vehicles as interim equipment. While suitable for training, these would have been of little value in combat, in which they could not have been expected to survive. The Standard Car Company produced one such vehicle, the Standard Car 4x2, or Beaverette, based on a saloon car and fitted with light armour and a Bren gun. An even more desperate adaptation saw some Bedford 30cwt lorries armoured with boiler plate to become known, in one unit at least, as 'Ironsides', a name also applied to a product of the Humber Company.

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

Humber Ironside (LRC Mk I)

Humber's Ironside was built on the chassis of the company's 1938 Super Snipe saloon, one of the few cars of more than 25hp then in production. (Both Humber and Standard were based in Coventry, the main production centre for British wheeled AFVs, with Humber and its Rootes Group sister companies, Commer and Karrier, building a substantial proportion of such vehicles.)

The Super Snipe was destined to become a classic. Marrying the body and chassis of the Snipe saloon with the 4.1-litre engine of the larger Humber Pullman saloon, it had excellent performance and a maximum speed of 79mph. Although Humber was distinctively British, there was an American influence in the design: engine designer Delmar G. 'Barney' Roos had joined Rootes from Studebaker in 1936 and was involved closely in the Super Snipe's birth. (Returning to the United States during the war, Roos became one of the team behind the Willys Jeep.) Not only did the Super Snipe spawn the LRC, described by Rootes as the Super Snipe light armoured car, but its chassis carried several other wartime vehicles. These included



Humber's answer to the Beaverette was the Ironside, also known as the Humberette or Super Snipe light armoured car. This image, possibly of the prototype, is taken from an identification document – hence the unusual camouflage. (TM: 2076/B6)

the Humber staff car, the best-known user of which was Gen, later FM, Sir Bernard Montgomery, Light and Heavy Utility trucks and the Humber Light Ambulance. The staff car and Light Utility used the basic 4x2 chassis, as in the LRC Mk I and Mk II, while the others used the 4x4 chassis, introduced with the LRC Mk III.

The Ironside LRC was sometimes known as the Humberette, since it was considered Rootes' equivalent of the Beaverette, but it was a superior vehicle, as its subsequent development proved. Weighing 2.8 tons, Ironside was 14ft 4in long, had armour up to 10mm thick and a 45mph top speed. Armed with two Bren light machine-guns (LMGs), it carried a No. 11 wireless set and a crew of three – commander, driver and gunner/wireless operator. Weather protection was a folding canvas tonneau cover. Powered by the Super Snipe's 4,086cc engine, it was fitted with War Department (WD) pattern divided wheels with run-flat tyres. It was named for Gen Sir Edmund Ironside, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) from 3 September 1939 until 27 May 1940 and then C-in-C Home Forces until 19 July 1940 (he became FM Lord Ironside in 1941). During his brief tenure as C-in-C Home Forces, Ironside issued the requirement leading to the AFV that bore his name, calling for a car 'for home defence, to have ample engine capacity and sufficient protection to withstand ball ammunition'. With its RAC-rated 27hp, 'and an actual output of 87bhp at 3,400rpm', the Humber 6-cylinder side-valve unit met Ironside's specification. Production began in July 1940, less than five weeks after first being ordered.

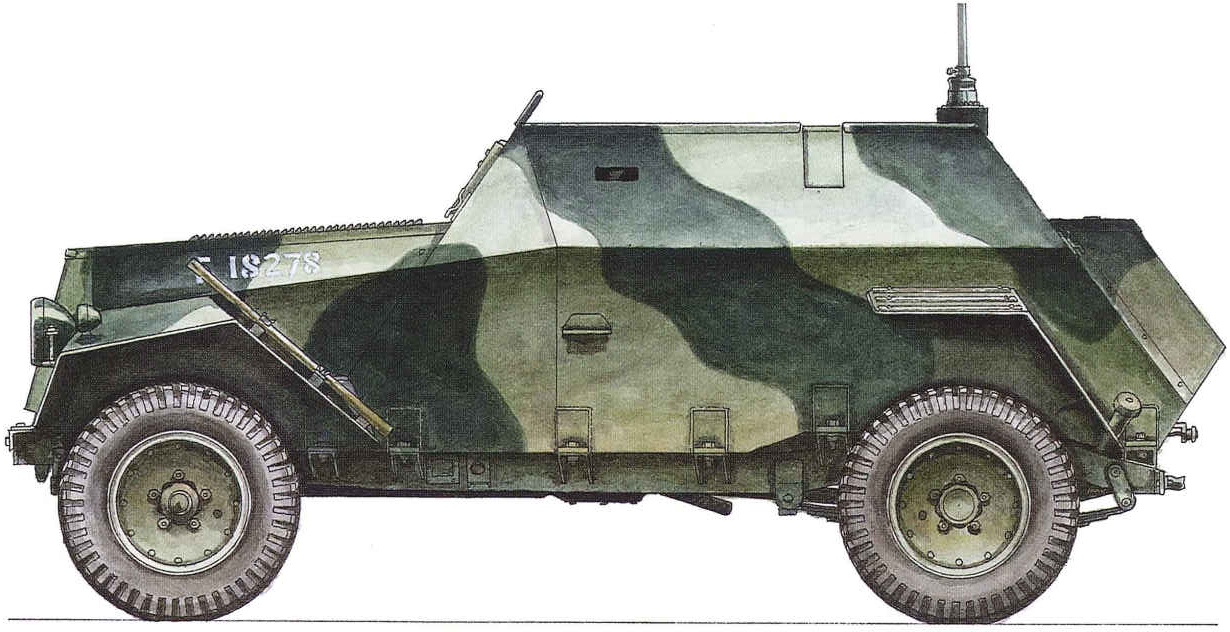
By then, however, Gen Ironside had retired from active duty. Although 1,200 of the vehicles bearing his name were ordered, only 200 of this

HUMBER IRONSIDE (LRC MK I)

The Ironside was an extemporized AFV, designed in 1940 at the behest of Gen Ironside, then C-in-C Home Forces, as a defensive vehicle in the event of a German invasion. Sometimes referred to as the Humberette, and described by Humber as the Super Snipe light armoured car, the Ironside used the strong chassis of the Humber Super Snipe saloon and its powerful 4.1-litre engine. It also retained the saloon's two-wheel drive, however, and thus had only limited cross-country capability. Lightly armoured and with no overhead protection for its three-man crew, who had two Bren LMGs as offensive armament, it could carry either a No. 11 or a No. 19 wireless set. Although it would have been no match for German armour in the event of an invasion, it provided a suitable vehicle for developing, and training in, reconnaissance tactics. No Ironsides saw action since the vehicle was superseded on the production line very quickly by the more capable LRC Mk II, which had an armoured roof with a turret mounting a Bren gun; the Mk II also carried a Boys .55in AT rifle and a smoke discharger. When production switched to the Mk II, only about 200 Ironsides had been built.

This Ironside is typical of the limited number that saw service with cavalry units, the Royal Tank Regiment and the Reconnaissance Corps, which first dubbed it the Light Reconnaissance Car (LRC), Mark I. It is finished in a disruptive pattern of standard camouflage colours (SCC) light-green G5 and dark-green G4 with the Reconnaissance Corps' tactical number, 41, in white numerals on a halved green-over-blue rectangle on both right front and rear mudguards. This scheme had replaced the pre-war scheme of overall deep bronze green No. 24, which had been used in a gloss finish.

The tactical number '41' was carried by all infantry reconnaissance vehicles in the form shown in the detailed drawing, although one regiment used a variation of a black '41' on a yellow-over-green diagonally split rectangle, yellow and green being the Reconnaissance Corps' colours. Personnel wore the Reconnaissance Corps cap badge as shown: a spearhead flanked by two lightning bolts. For enlisted personnel this was in brass, although there was a plastic economy version, while officers wore a bi-metal badge. Some Scottish units used a silver badge and 49 Recce added a small white rose of York to the shaft of the spear.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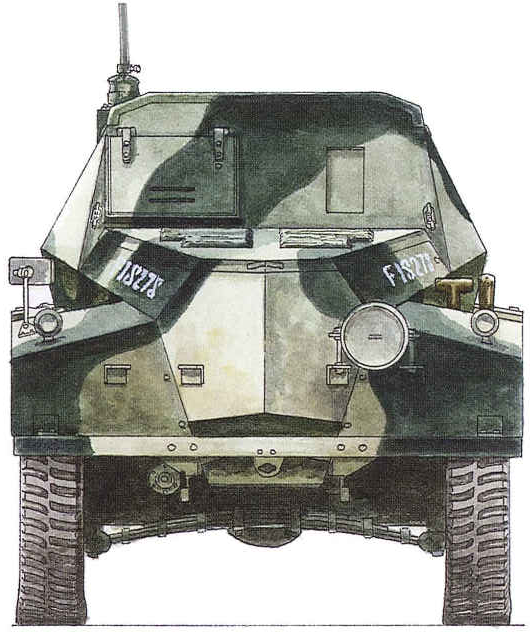
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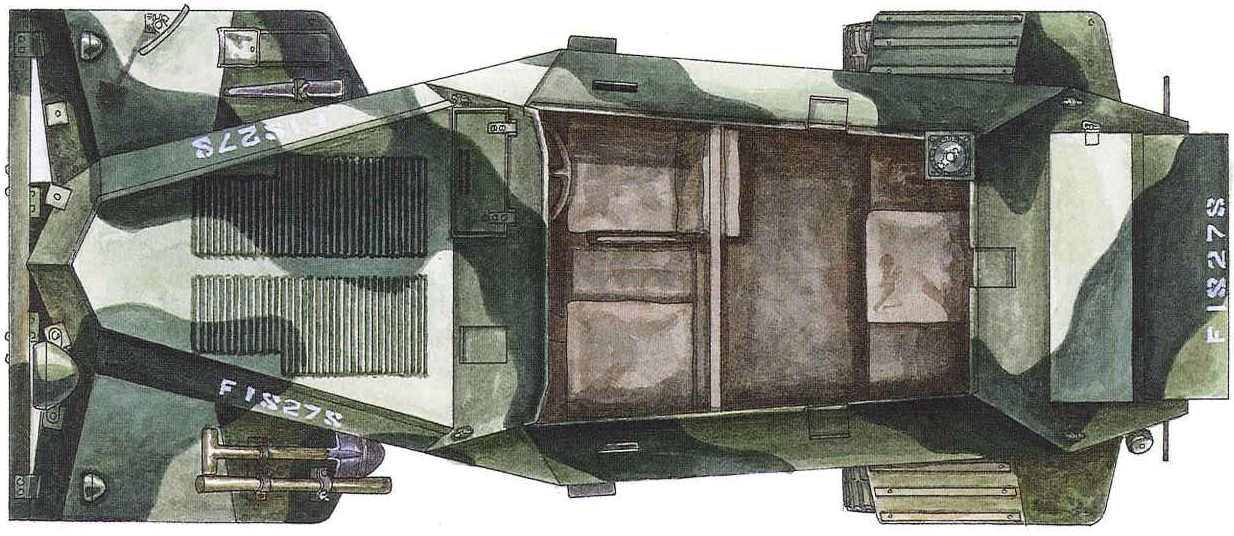
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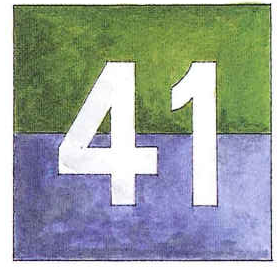
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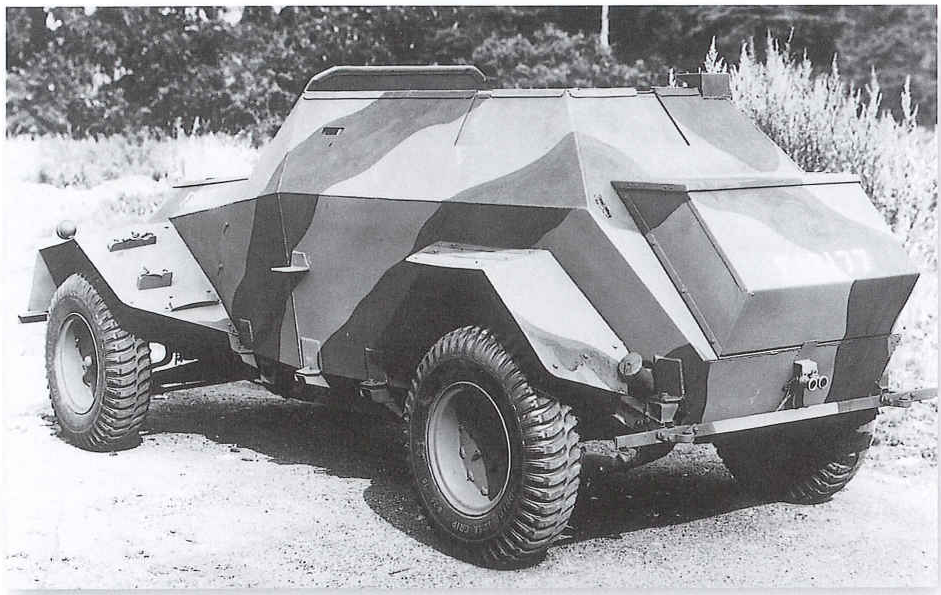
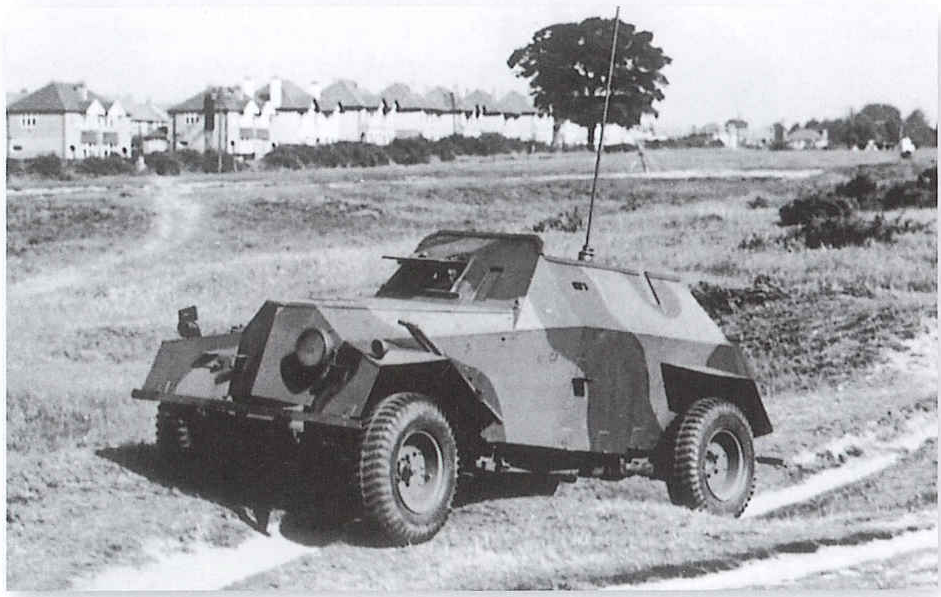
TOP
Ironside in service form. Note the disruptive camouflage scheme of 1940 and full front mudguards. (TM: 480/C6)

BELOW
An Ironside displays its limited cross-country capability. Note the repositioned headlamp. (TM: 677/D2)



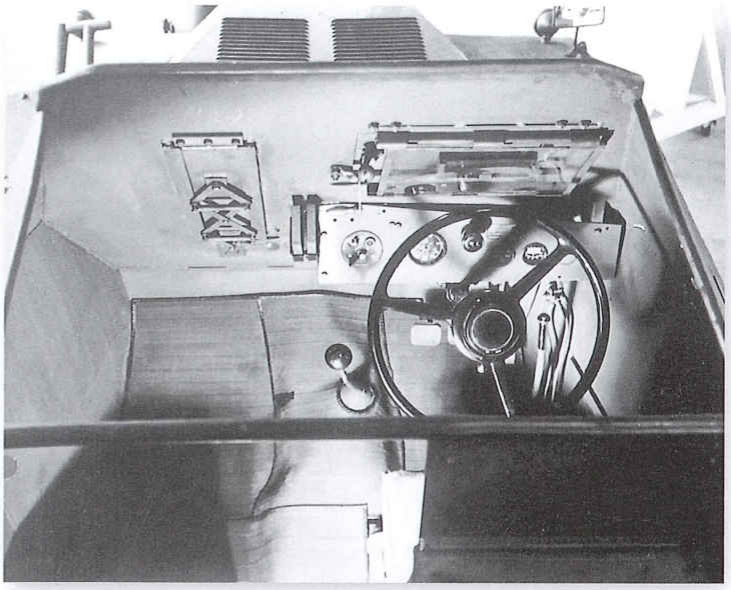


'avowedly ... emergency design' were built before the improved LRC Mk II took its place on the production lines following a decision 'to develop [Ironside] into a properly equipped reconnaissance car'.

Ironside recipients included cavalry regiments that were temporarily without tanks, while some Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) reconnaissance squadrons received them in lieu of scout cars. As new tanks, scout cars and armoured cars were in production by January 1941, when the Reconnaissance Corps was formed, it was possible to transfer Ironsides to recce battalions. It was the Reconnaissance Corps that applied the description 'Car, 4x2, Light Reconnaissance'. With military census marks superseding civilian registration marks in January 1940, Ironsides received 'F' census marks, identifying them as armoured cars. However, the later LRC Mk IIs and Mk IIIs were given 'M' census marks, thus denoting them as 'motor cars'. Since the LRCs were mounted on conventional car chassis, it is easy to understand how a bureaucrat might have decided that the M mark should apply. Yet that leaves the anomalous situation of the Ironside

carrying the armoured car census mark, whereas its more capable successors joined the Army's motor cars by carrying M numbers.

Apart from the addition of a fully enclosed 7mm armoured roof, with an opening hatch for the commander, and a conical turret, Ironside's basic body was retained in later variants, although crew access doors were cut in the sides. Its angular design employed the concept of sloped armour to improve protection. Although maximum armour thickness was only 10mm (less than half an inch), the angling of its panels had the practical effect of increasing thickness; as can be seen from photographs and drawings, the car's sides were angled out from the chassis to a line slightly over mid-height from where they then angled inwards. This configuration provided protection against small-arms fire of all but the heaviest calibres, as the sloping sides made penetration more difficult for any round not striking at 90 degrees to the armour's face. Engine compartment panels were also angled and twin armoured opening shutters, operated by the driver, protected the radiator. The outward angles of the lower side panels also offered some protection from blast, but the floor was unarmoured, leading crews to improvise protection with sandbags. A plan view of the car emphasizes its angular structure: rhomboidal in shape, the overall layout resembled two cropped wedges. Manufacture of the armoured bodies was sub-contracted with the final fitting to the chassis carried out by Humber.

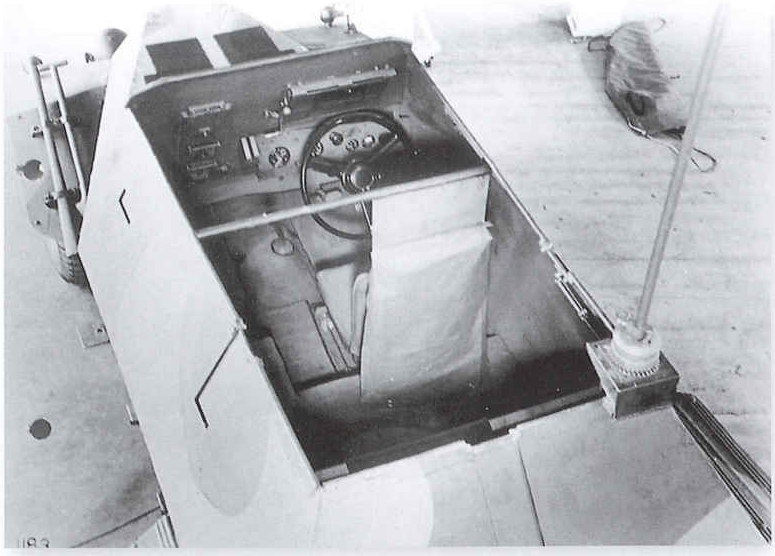


Ironside – the driver's compartment. (TM: 677/C1)

Armour	Details
Ironside	Front – 10mm; sides – 7mm & 9mm
Mk II	Front & sides as for Ironside; roof & rear – 7mm; turret – 6mm
Mk III/IIIA	Front – 12mm; Sides – 8mm; roof & rear – 7mm; turret – 8mm

It should be noted that two authoritative publications (*Data Book of Wheeled Vehicles* and the official *Armour Welding on the Light Reconnaissance Car Humber Mark III*) provide different figures for armour thickness; one includes the Mk III data shown in the above table and the other suggests that both Mks II and III were armoured identically. Since the figures above on the Mk III are taken from the contemporary publication related specifically to that vehicle's armour, it may be assumed that these are correct.

As already noted, Ironside used the Super Snipe's engine. This was not a high-performance unit providing sports-car-style acceleration. However, it had been designed to allow Humber's luxury Pullman saloon to cruise comfortably at high speeds. Usually described as a 4-litre or 4.1-litre engine, it had the torque needed to propel the much heavier LRC at sustained speeds of some 40mph and to accept comfortably the loads imposed on an AFV. Although the 6-cylinder engine could operate on fuel in the lower to middle



Ironside – the fighting compartment. (TM: 677/B6

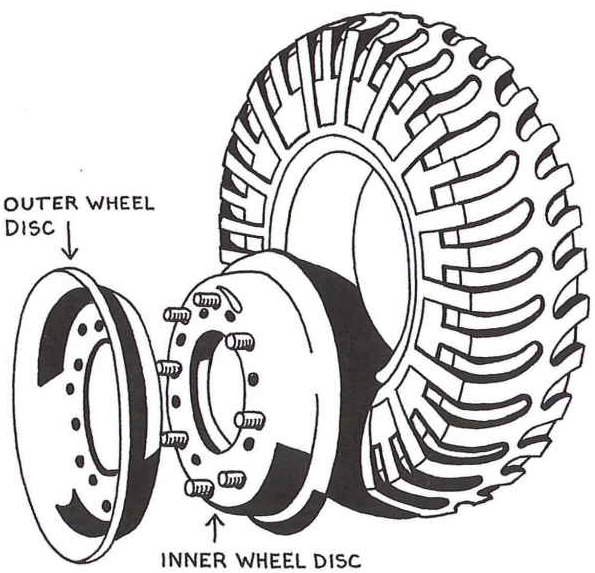
octane range, it was not a multi-fuel engine in the modern sense and used petrol only. As noted, swift acceleration was not a feature – even the post-war Super Snipe took more than 20 seconds to reach 60mph – but the engine's proven reliability, simplicity and ease of servicing were positive assets for units operating in basic field conditions. Drive was transmitted through a four-speed gearbox fitted with synchromesh on third and fourth gears; there was a single reverse gear. This muscular engine was also used in other Rootes' products, including Humber heavy armoured cars, the Humber scout car and Karrier trucks.

That the LRC was fitted with run-flat tyres might surprise anyone who remembers the 'introduction' of such tyres in the 1970s. Although the Mini 1275GT was the first car ever to be sold with run-flats, in 1974, the idea was patented as early as 1892. An American-designed run-flat offered in 1958 did not attract many sales and the concept died in the United States.

Basically, a run-flat tyre allows a vehicle to continue at reduced speed over a limited distance with a deflated tyre; typically, the speed is restricted to 50mph and the distance to no more than 50 miles. According to the *Data Book of Wheeled Vehicles* run-flat tyres were for front-line vehicles and that 'in the event of it being shot up, an RF [run-flat] tyre totally deflated will carry its given load a distance up to 50 miles so as to bring the vehicle to safety'. It also noted that, even with a totally deflated inner tube, the run-flat would only deflect from the rim by 30–35 per cent, in which condition the vehicle was controllable at up to 30–40mph. Thus, should an LRC sustain a puncture at speed, the tyre would stay on the wheel, allowing the driver to retain control.

BELOW
The WD split-rim and Dunlop Run-Flat (RF) tyre as fitted to the LRC. Based on a drawing in the *Data Book of Wheeled Vehicles*. (Tim Webster)

BELOW RIGHT
The Dunlop Trak Run-Flat (RF) tyre with its cross-country tread. Based on a drawing in the *Data Book of Wheeled Vehicles*. (Tim Webster)

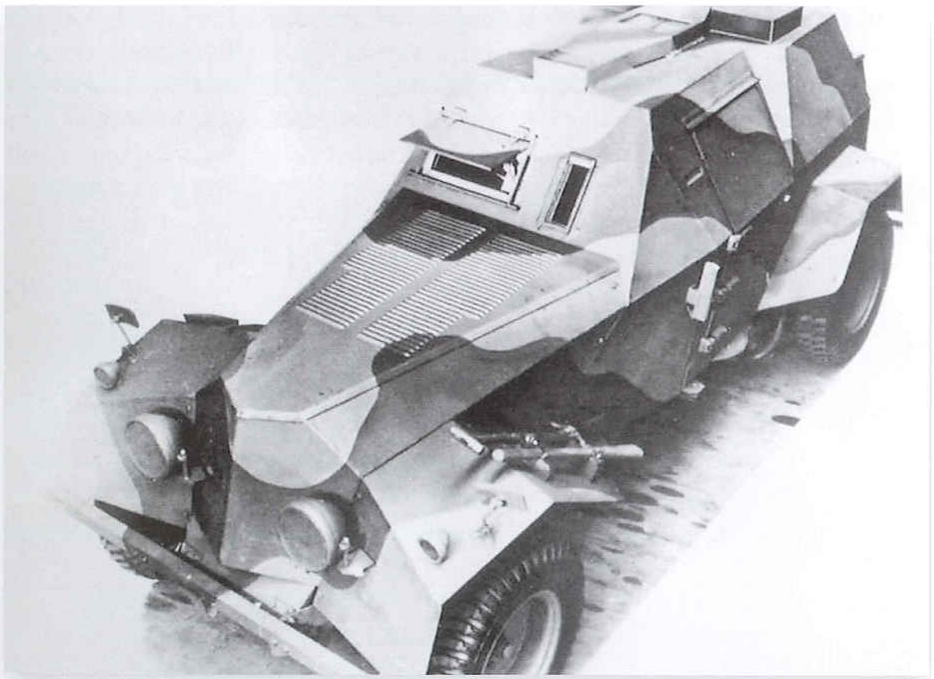


The run-flats used on British vehicles were made by Dunlop and could be fitted only to WD divided-rim wheels to ensure that the tyre would not roll off the rim. Manufactured with the standard Dunlop cross-country tread, run-flat tyres had a special inner tube, a bead spacer and a bead lock, but could not carry the same weight as an equivalent-sized conventional tyre. Although they had a limited life and were more expensive than conventional tyres, run-flats were worth the investment. Their military value was obvious, especially for wheeled AFVs; the facility to drive out of an engagement in which tyres had been penetrated by bullets or splinters was appreciated by many soldiers, some of whom owed their lives to the ability to continue moving in this condition. In such circumstances, the admonition to not 'run a yard further than necessary with tyres deflated' is unlikely to have been the first priority in any driver's mind.

Special Ironside saloon

A need for an armoured VIP saloon to transport the royal family and cabinet ministers was met by the Cricklewood-based coachbuilders Thrupp & Maberly, who adapted the Ironside design to provide two Special Ironside saloons; six armoured staff cars were also ordered. Although Thrupp & Maberly had a close association with Rootes, they built specialized bodies for several companies, especially Rolls-Royce. These Specials were roofed, with VIP interiors and front and rear compartments separated by a Perspex panel; the front passenger-side seat tilted to allow the panel to be moved for access to the back seat. Those in the rear compartment, the upper part of which was widened to provide shoulder-room, could communicate with the driver by microphone, and they rode in comparative luxury on hide upholstery and with lower side panels covered with West of England cloth. A wool rug was provided for comfort and ancillary heating, plus a fire extinguisher. The compartment was also fitted with an eight-day clock.

Externally, the Special sported two headlights, one either side of the radiator, as distinct from the LRC's single light, together with sidelights atop the mudguards; each mudguard also mounted rear-view mirrors. Emergency



Ironside Special Saloon, showing ventilated roof and widening of the passenger compartment. (George Moore)

RIGHT
Ironside Special Saloon, showing enlarged entrance door. (George Moore)

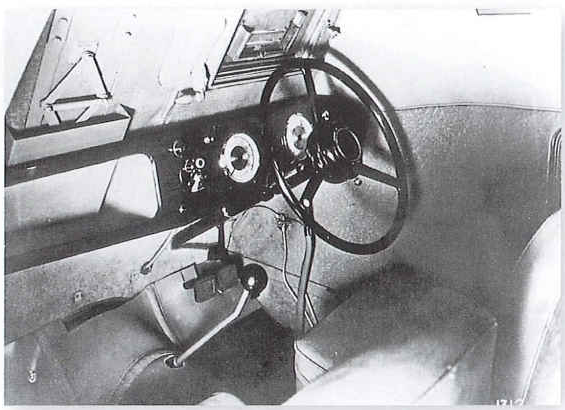
BELOW RIGHT
HM Queen Elizabeth alights from an Ironside Special. (Les Jackson)

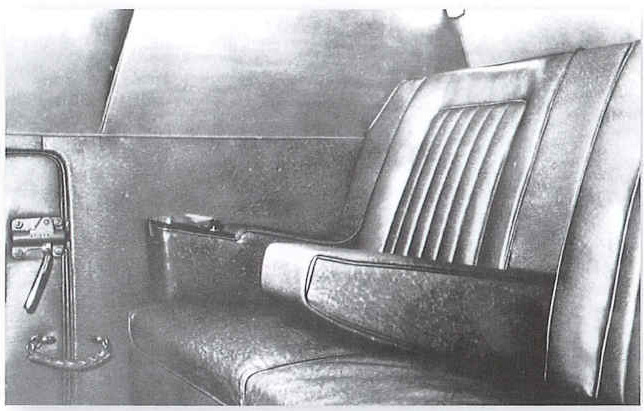
BELOW
Driver's compartment of an Ironside Special – very different from the standard Ironside's interior, especially the upholstered side of the cabin, leather seat and the dashboard. (TM: 2076/D6)

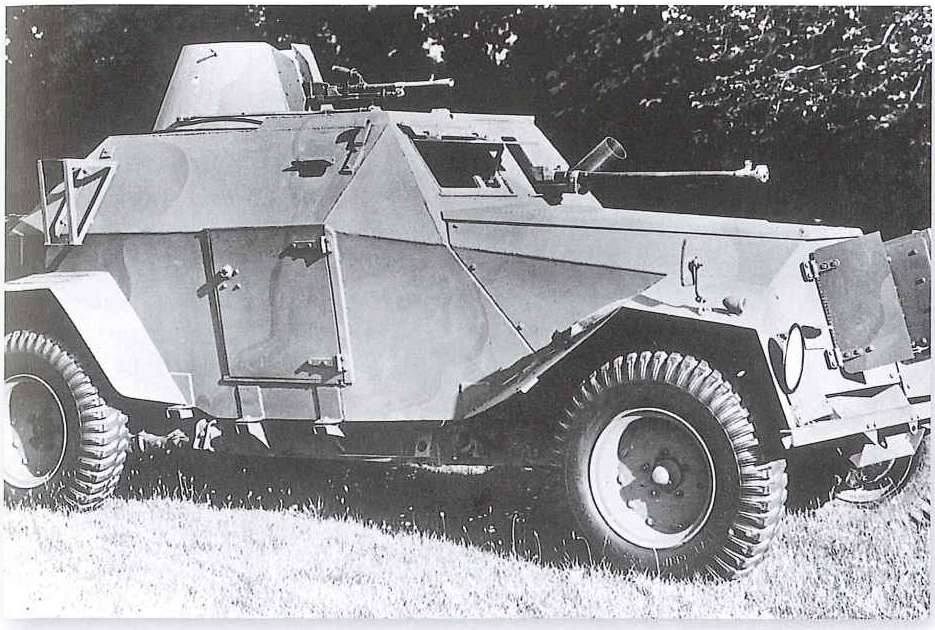
BELOW RIGHT
The passenger compartment of the Special showing leather seats and upholstered side walls. On the driver's side a small access door was provided. (TM: 2076/D5)

tools, including a shovel, were stowed on the mudguards. Semaphore direction indicators were fitted to the sides of the car.

These cars gave good service and were a precursor to the specially adapted limousines used for similar duties today; they were replaced by bulletproof Pullman limousines. While the integrity of their armour was compromised by the large door on the passenger side, a window in the passenger compartment and a small door for the driver, they offered good all-round protection against small-arms fire and limited protection against bomb splinters.



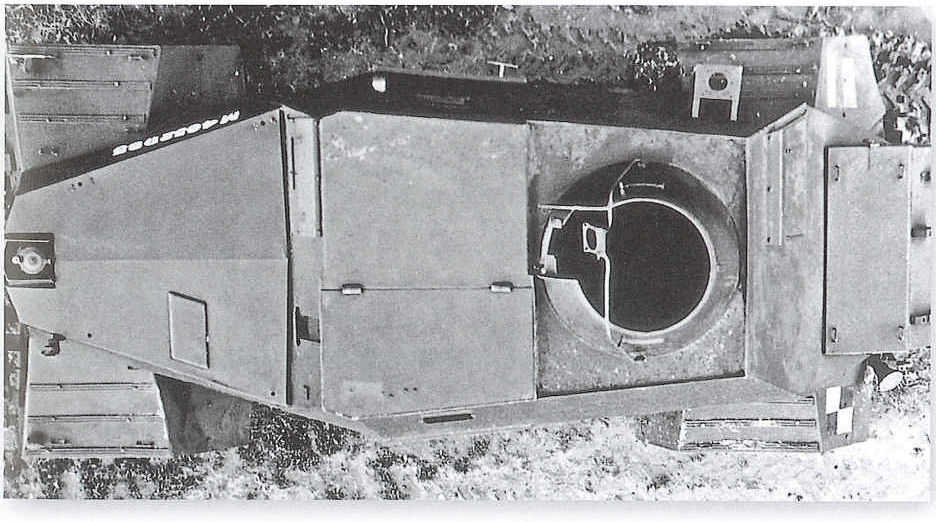




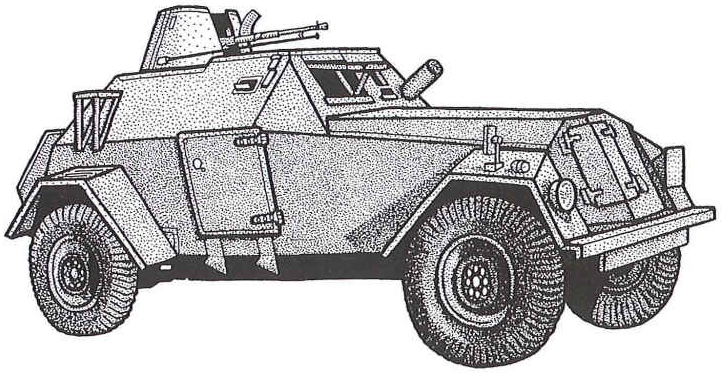
LRC Mk II, referred to in some documents as Ironside Mk II, with Boys rifle, smoke discharger, turret-mounted Bren and radiator shutters opened. (TM: 1205/D1)

Humber LRC Mk II

Although a useful training vehicle for the Reconnaissance Corps, the LRC Mk I was not a truly combat-worthy light AFV, since it was not fully enclosed and its armament could not traverse. These shortcomings were eliminated when the 'Car, 4x2, Light Reconnaissance, Humber Mk II' – described in one document as Ironside Mk II – appeared in 1941 with enclosed roof and open-top, all-round traversing turret for its LMG on an anti-aircraft (AA) mounting, although the weapon could also be used against ground targets. The manually operated turret, fitted to the rear section of the roof, had the gun mounting offset to the driver's side. In addition, the Mk II carried a Boys rifle, fired though the commander's shuttered slot in the left front plate, and a single smoke discharger. While a No. 11 or No. 19 wireless set could be carried, this precluded carrying the Boys rifle. As with the Mk I, the Mk II used the Super Snipe chassis and running gear – thus remaining two-wheel drive, another major shortcoming. However, the powerful 4,086cc engine could cope with the Mk II's added weight without difficulty. With an estimated fuel consumption of 12mpg, the car's radius of action was 190 miles.



Plan view of a Mk II. Visible here are the commander's hatch, offset Bren mounting and the shutter through which the Boys rifle was fitted. The vehicle's rhomboidal shape is clear. (TM: 210/A2)



Humber LRC Mk II, after a drawing in the *Data Book of Wheeled Vehicles*. (Tim Webster)

Humber LRC Mk III/IIIA

During 1941 the definitive version of the Humber went into production. Outwardly, the Mk III resembled the Mk II but it differed in having four-wheel drive, thus giving it true off-road capability. When travelling on roads, rear-wheel drive was used, but off-road a transfer gearbox engaged four-wheel drive and lowered the gear ratios. The inclusion of four-wheel drive meant some changes in appearance. Less obvious were a modified chassis, 2¼in shortening of the wheelbase, and slightly increased front and rear wheel track; overall length decreased by 2in. Engine, gearbox, steering gear and pedals were moved forward to reduce the overhang behind the rear wheels, thus distributing weight more evenly over all four wheels. This led, however, to the steering box and brake pedal fouling the hull's side panel, a problem overcome by creating a very obvious external 'blister' in the panel.

The car gained an inch in width but height remained unchanged, while weight increased by over 8cwt and maximum speed reduced from 75mph to 60mph. Fuel consumption decreased to an estimated 11mpg and radius of action to 175 miles. Maximum armour thickness was increased to 12mm (still less than half an inch) and the car now carried a Mk II Bren gun in the

B

1. IRONSIDE SPECIAL SALOON

Some Ironsides, perhaps eight in total, were converted by the coachbuilders Thrupp & Maberly into Special Saloon cars for VIPs such as the Royal Family, the Prime Minister and other cabinet ministers. The original contracts show that two 'specials' and six 'armoured staff cars' were ordered. The most obvious external changes included the addition of an armoured roof, installation of a large passenger door, two headlamps instead of one, semaphore direction indicators and a ventilation system fitted on the roof. Inside the vehicle there were further changes: leather seats and upholstered side walls were included in the passenger compartment, the upper portion of which was widened for comfort, while the driver enjoyed a more comfortable seat and a better-designed dashboard. Ironsides assigned to the Royal Family often operated in convoy with a bulletproof Humber Pullman limousine and a Humber armoured car. They were later replaced by the Pullman limousines.

Although their purpose could be described as essentially civilian, these Special Saloons continued to wear the same military disruptive camouflage scheme of light green and dark green as the basic Ironsides and carried War Office census numbers rather than civilian registrations.

2. LRC MK III, 1 CZECH ARMOURED BRIGADE

When 1 Czech Armoured Brigade joined 21 Army Group in France in 1944, it included a reconnaissance unit equipped with LRC Mk IIIs, which had been handed over from British stocks. After its initial deployment to France and Second (British) Army, on 8 and 9 October 1944 the Czech Brigade relieved 154 (Highland) Brigade in the force investing Dunkirk. The port remained in German hands until the end of the war and the brigade's LRC Mk IIIs were used during the siege and skirmished with German units. At the end of the war, elements of the Czech Brigade were detached to join Third (US) Army forces despatched to Czechoslovakia. At least one LRC was included in that small Czech force and it was photographed in Prague during the victory parade at the end of May 1945. It is seen in what is believed to have been a specially applied, and polished, finish based on the standard British Army SCC khaki-green G3 camouflage scheme. However, in a black-and-white photograph the car looks so dark that it might have been painted in the pre-war gloss deep bronze green. As with most Allied AFVs in North-West Europe, it bears the air identification marking of a white five-pointed star in a broken circle on the bonnet and an unadorned star on the sides of the car, while it retains its British military census number. In 'parade dress' the car is free of any clutter in its stowage racks.

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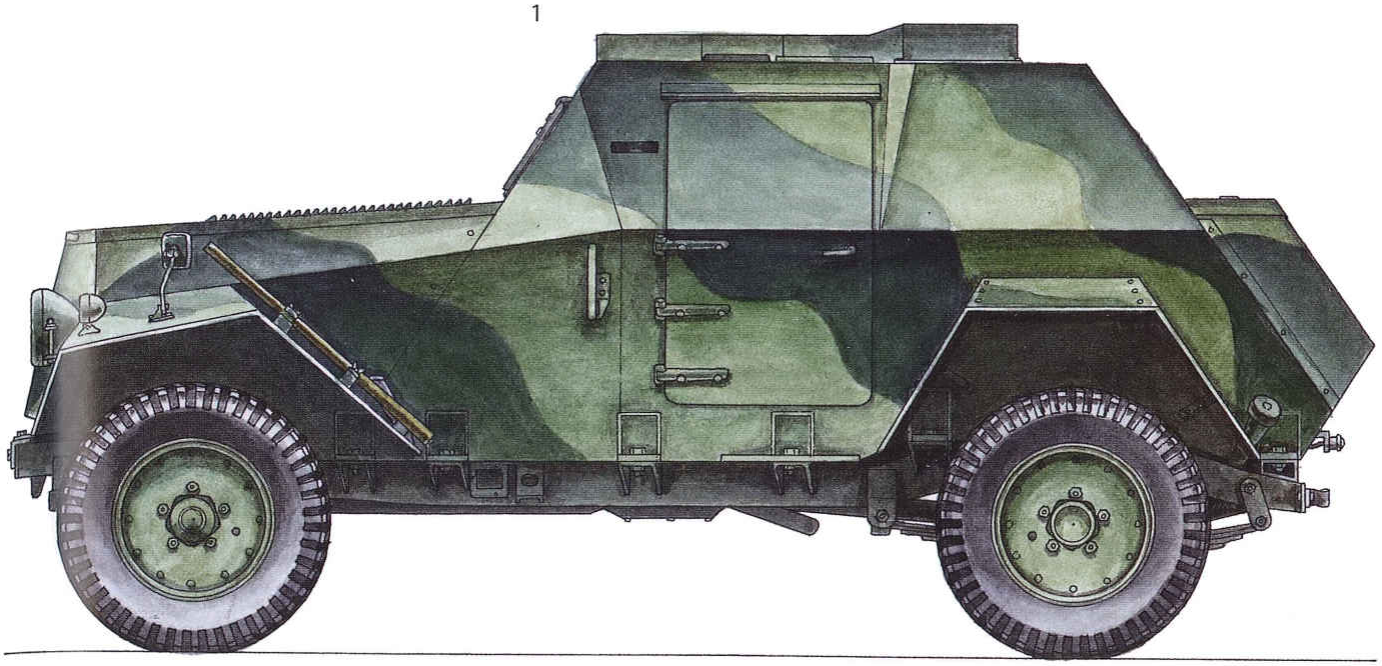

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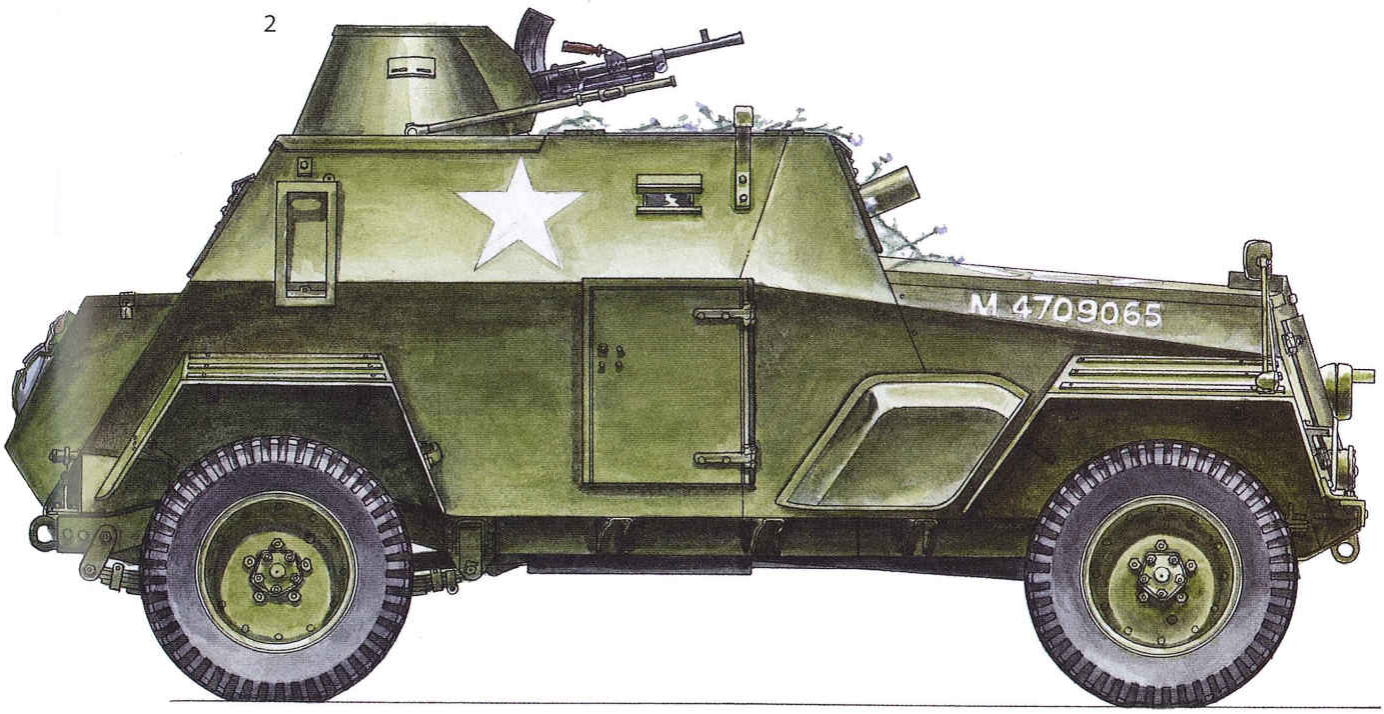


Mk IIs in training, fitted with Boys rifles, Brens and smoke dischargers. Commanders observe from under partially raised hatches. (IWM: H17605)

turret and a Boys rifle. (The turret design was modified to accommodate the Mk II Bren.)

The Bren was Britain's standard LMG. It was derived from the 7.92mm Czech ZB Model 26, designed by Vaclav Holek and manufactured in Zbrojovka by the BRNO company – the name Bren, or BREn, first noted in 1935, combines BRNO and Enfield Lock, where the Royal Small Arms Factory produced Britain's version. In 1931 this weapon won the British Army competition to replace the Lewis gun. Modified for .303in ammunition, the Bren could fire 450 to 500 rounds per minute to an effective range of some 500 yards – maximum range was about 3,000 yards – but rate of fire was reduced by having to change the 30-round magazine. It could fire single shots or automatically with a muzzle velocity of 2,440 feet per second (fps). The first British-manufactured weapon was fired on 3 September 1937, exactly two years before war began.

Not only was the Bren reliable – the standard stoppage procedure was said to be 'change magazine' – but it was also very accurate and could be used as an AA weapon or against ground targets; a 100-round drum magazine was fitted for the AA role. Each LRC normally carried 1,120 rounds of Bren ammunition, with 400 in four drum magazines and the remainder in 30-round magazines.

Although the Bren remained a standard fitting on the LRC until the end of the war, photographic evidence shows that one regiment experimented with fitting captured German MG42s to their LRCs. This weapon gave a much heavier punch with its 7.92mm round and 1,200rpm rate of fire. However, it is not known how many LRCs were converted in this fashion.

Side view of a Mk II showing weaponry, camouflage scheme and tools fitted to the front left mudguard. (Les Jackson)

Initially intended to provide infantrymen with an anti-tank (AT) weapon, the Boys rifle entered service in 1937. Development had begun in 1934 to provide a hand-held, shoulder-fired, anti-armour rifle weighing no more than 35lb. At first the weapon was known as the Stanchion, but when Capt H. C. Boys of the War Office, who was involved heavily with the project, died, the rifle was renamed and its calibre was increased from .5in to .55in. In 1937 the Boys' rounds could penetrate the armour of contemporary German Pz Is and IIs but not that of medium tanks. (One set of official instructions recommended that a soldier confronted by a medium tank should aim at its suspension, or hold fire until it was within 30 yards.)

Although the armour-piercing bullet could punch through 21mm, almost an inch, of armour at 326 yards at zero degrees angle, by the time war began only a very brave or foolhardy soldier would have tackled a tank with a Boys rifle.

The Boys resembled a standard bolt-action rifle but was much longer – 64in overall. It weighed 36lb without its five-round magazine, which added another 2lb 7oz. Not only was the Boys heavy and cumbersome, it had a tremendous recoil that left many soldiers with bruised shoulders or even fractured collar bones. Although later used for other purposes, including AA fire on at least one occasion by US Marines in the Gilbert Islands, it was superseded by the PIAT in British service and removed from LRCs. No substitute was ever introduced although, in Tunisia, one enterprising NCO fitted a 20mm cannon from a crashed Spitfire in its place on his LRC (see below p.24). In both the Mk II and Mk III, the commander's seat had two positions: low for firing the Boys or high for observation through the roof hatch.

Close-up of the Boys rifle on a Mk II with the commander observing through binoculars. RAC steel helmets have yet to be issued and crewmen are still wearing Mk II helmets. (IWM: H17606)

A single 4in smoke discharger was also fitted, the standard location for which was in front of the commander. However, it was often moved to the turret where an improvised mounting allowed the discharger to rotate through 360 degrees, thereby increasing effectiveness. Eight smoke generators were carried for the discharger.

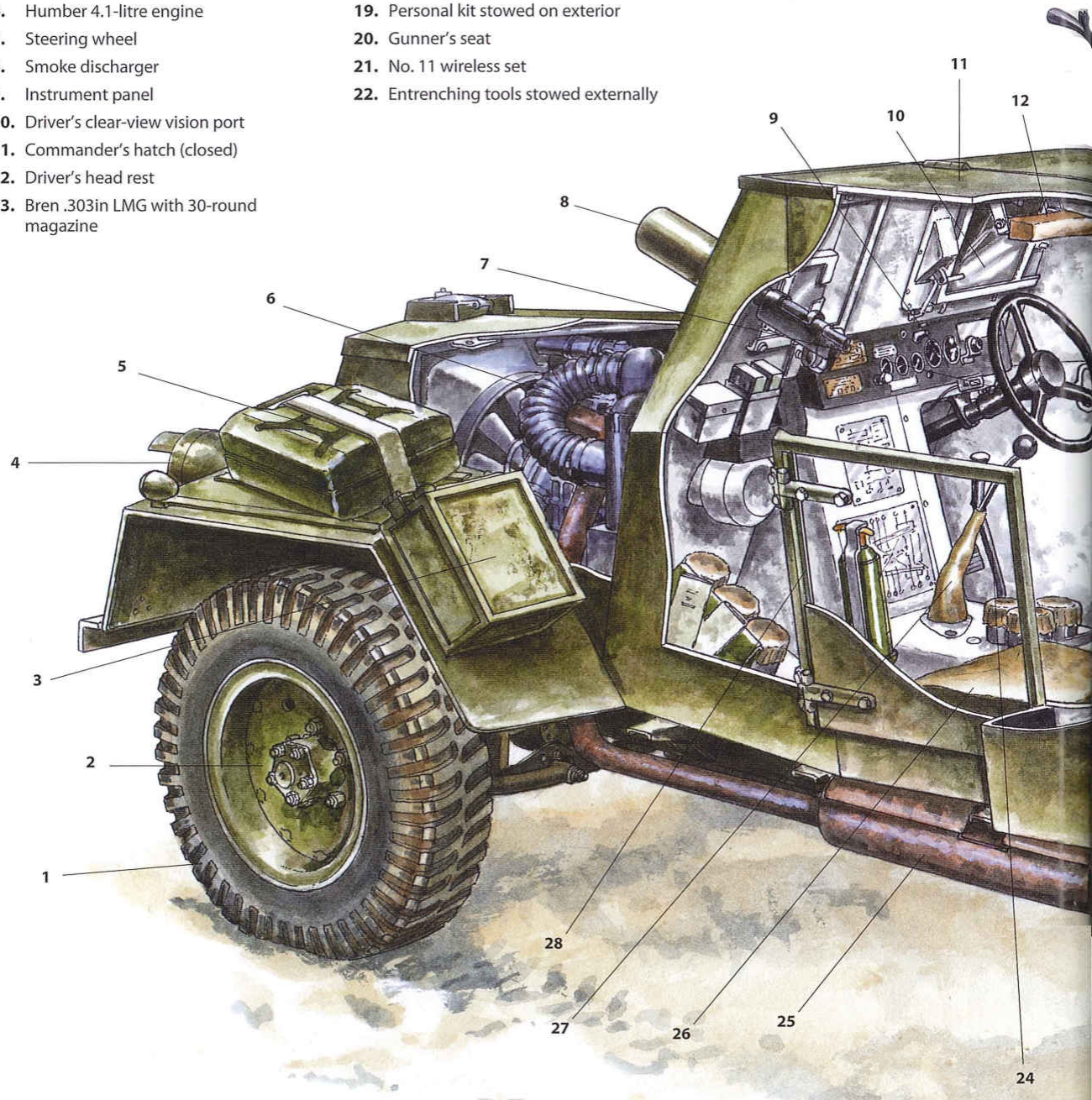
The LRC Mk III, the version that reconnaissance regiments took into action, proved versatile. Some modifications, however, made as a result of

Mk IIs of 29 Independent Squadron, later part of 49th (West Riding) Reconnaissance Regiment, at Shanklin, Isle of Wight, in March 1942 while supporting 214 Independent Infantry Brigade. (IWM: H17598)

C HUMBER LIGHT RECONNAISSANCE CAR MK IIIA

Key

1. Dunlop Trak Run-Flat cross-country tyre
2. War Department split-rim wheel hub
3. Added stowage from ammunition, ration boxes
4. Headlamp
5. Fuel jerrycan strapped to mudguard
6. Humber 4.1-litre engine
7. Steering wheel
8. Smoke discharger
9. Instrument panel
10. Driver's clear-view vision port
11. Commander's hatch (closed)
12. Driver's head rest
13. Bren .303in LMG with 30-round magazine
14. Driver's seat
15. Gunner's turret
16. Wireless aerial
17. 4 x 100-round anti-aircraft magazines for Bren
18. Rear-view panel (closed)
19. Personal kit stowed on exterior
20. Gunner's seat
21. No. 11 wireless set
22. Entrenching tools stowed externally
23. Fuel filler
24. Transfer gearbox selector
25. Exhaust and silencer
26. Commander's position
27. Gear stick
28. Side door



Specifications

Crew: 3

Weight: 72cwt (3.6 tons)

Overall length: 14ft 2½in

Width: 6ft 2in

Height: 6ft 11in

Engine: Humber 4,086cc, 6-cylinder, inline, side-valve, petrol, liquid-cooled

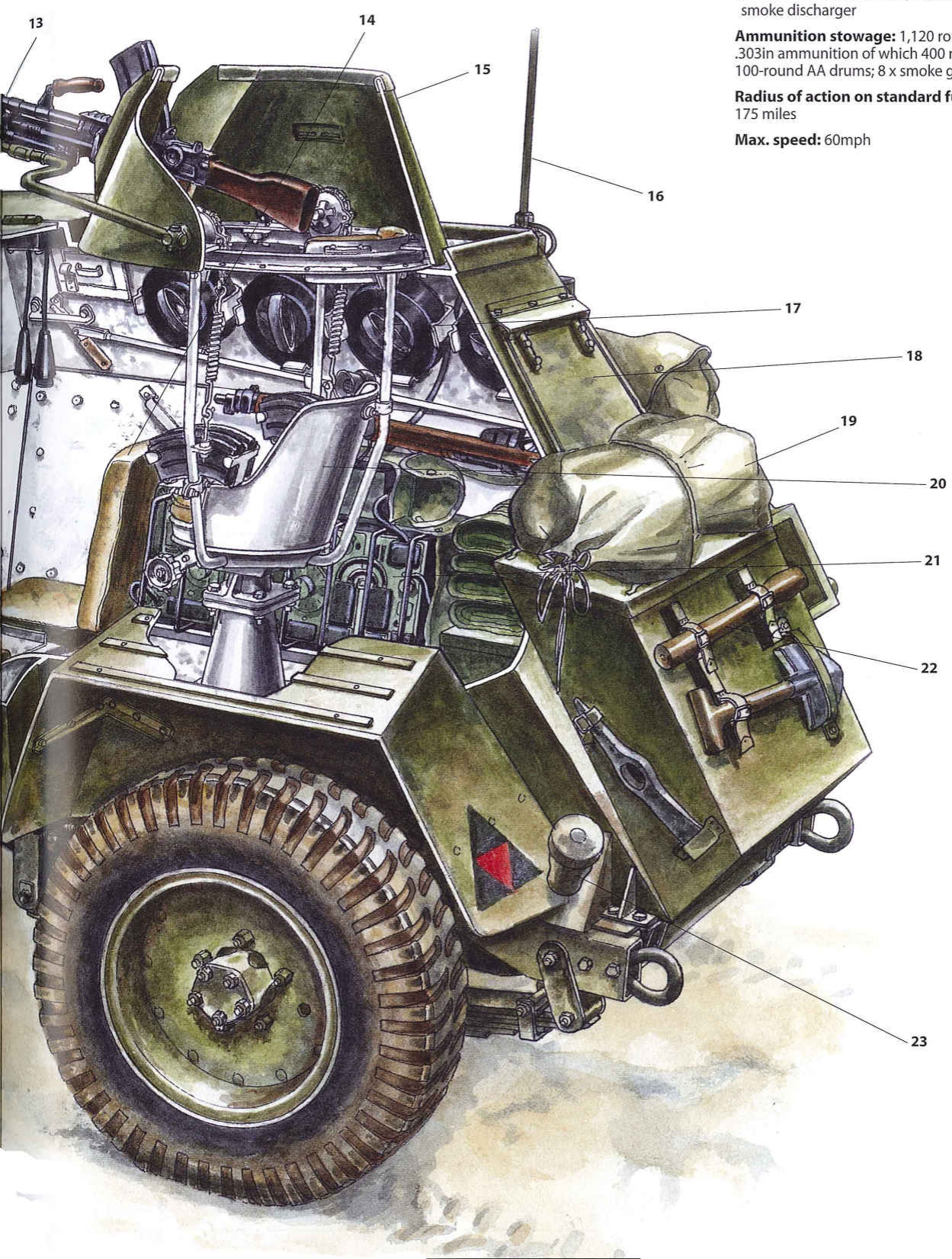
Transmission: four-speed forward and one reverse, four-wheel drive, with lower gear ratios in four-speed mode. Synchromesh on third and fourth gears

Armament: 1 x Bren LMG; 1 x 4in smoke discharger

Ammunition stowage: 1,120 rounds x .303in ammunition of which 400 rounds in 4 100-round AA drums; 8 x smoke generators

Radius of action on standard fuel tank: 175 miles

Max. speed: 60mph



Wireless training on a No. 19 set at the Reconnaissance Training Centre. In the background is a Mk II with commander, gunner and driver visible (the latter only just). (IWM: H28070)

operational experience, resulted in the final version – the Mk IIIA. Obvious changes included replacement of the rear stowage bin by side panniers and additional vision ports at the front upper corners of the crew compartment, which were among enhancements in overall hull design. Under the bonnet was an improved carburettor while a two-stage oil-bath air cleaner replaced the earlier single-stage version. Weight increased by 4cwt, but other dimensions and speed were unchanged. To compensate for the added weight, 12in-diameter brake drums were fitted and the suspension was strengthened. Although most Mk IIIAs were built as new vehicles, some were modified from existing Mk IIIs.

Production totals and users

In all, over 2,400 LRCs, including Ironsides, were built and served in Tunisia, Sicily, Italy and North-West Europe, as well as the UK. (Some publications suggest that the production total was over 3,600, but this figure includes cancelled orders.) Principal users were the Reconnaissance Corps and the RAF Regiment, while several other Allied nations also operated them; some LRCs saw post-war service with British units in the Middle East, India and the Far East.

Humber LRC Mk I to IIIA Comparison Table

	Mk I	Mk II	Mk III	Mk IIIA
Length	14ft 4in	14ft 4½in	14ft 2½in	14ft 2½in
Width	6ft 2in	6ft 2in	6ft 2in	6ft 2in
Height	6ft 2in	6ft 11in	6ft 11in	6ft 11in
Wheelbase	9ft 6in	9ft 6in	9ft 3¾in	9ft 3¾in
Wheeltrack (front)	4ft 11⅛in	4ft 8⅛in	5ft 1in	5ft 1in
Wheeltrack (rear)	4ft 11⅝in	4ft 11⅝in	5ft 0¾in	5ft 0¾in
Tyres	9¼ x 16in run-flat	9¼ x 16in run- flat	9¼ x 16in run-flat	9¼ x 16in run-flat
Fully laden weight	56.25cwt (2.81 tons)	59.5cwt (3.17 tons)	68cwt (3.39 tons)	72cwt (3.60 tons)
Speed on road	45mph	75mph	60mph	60mph
Engine	Humber 4.1-litre, 6-cylinder inline; side-valve petrol, liquid-cooled	Humber 4.1-litre, 6-cylinder inline; side-valve petrol, liquid-cooled	Humber 4.1-litre, 6-cylinder inline; side-valve petrol, liquid-cooled	Humber 4.1-litre, 6-cylinder inline; side-valve petrol, liquid-cooled
Armament	2 x .303in LMG (Bren)	1 x Boys .55in rifle; 1 x .303in LMG (Bren); 1 x smoke discharger	1 x Boys .55in rifle;1 x .303in LMG (Bren); 1 x smoke discharger	1 x .303in LMG (Bren); 1 x smoke discharger

Initially, Reconnaissance Corps units were issued with 45 LRCs each, a number that later increased to 52. These, together with Universal Carriers, formed their basic equipment. The LRC was well suited to the reconnaissance role, but its lack of a heavy weapon and its light armour meant that it could not hope to outfight even light German armoured cars.

Among lessons learnt from the first unit to serve in the true recce role was the need for a heavier armoured car; the LRC had never been other than a temporary expedient. From the later stages of the Tunisian campaign, true armoured cars, dubbed heavy armoured cars (HACs) in recce units, were assigned to each regiment, but LRCs continued to serve until the end of the war, although the numbers assigned to each regiment were much reduced from those in the Corps' early days. Such was the LRC's service that it remains the vehicle most closely associated with the Reconnaissance Corps.

OPERATIONAL HISTORY

The Mediterranean

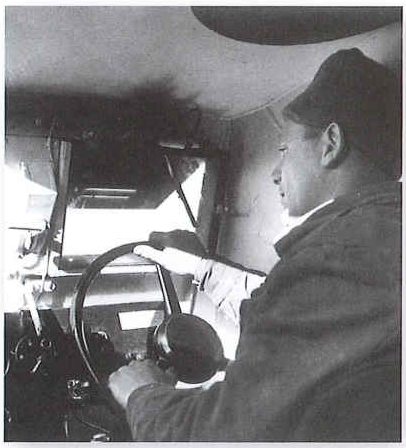
The Mk III's first operational deployment was to North Africa and with the Eighth Army, but the first reconnaissance unit sent to the Middle East did not take the LRCs into action. Instead, 50th Battalion Reconnaissance Corps (50 Recce) was assigned to 22 Armoured Brigade as lorried infantry and fought in that role at Gazala in June 1942, where the battalion was lost. Following this, both 44 Recce and 51 Recce arrived in Egypt, where the former spent two weeks in acclimatization and training. Among conclusions reached during that period were that the regiment's motorcycles would be useless in the desert and that LRCs were unsuited to desert conditions, since they would be inviting targets for enemy guns due to their high profile. In close country, the LRC relied for survival on its speed and the commander's eye for cover, advantages that it was thought would be lost in desert terrain. However, soft desert sand was found to be passable once the skills and techniques of driving over it were mastered, while run-flat tyres could, under exceptional circumstances (e.g., to get through very soft sand), be deflated completely, but had to be re-inflated as soon as possible.

Thus it would seem that the decision not to use the LRC in the desert was based on a flawed perception rather than real evidence. Certainly the success of similar vehicles – the Marmon-Herrington armoured car, for example – suggest that this was the case, while Great War-vintage Rolls-Royce armoured

Mk IIs of 29 Independent Squadron on a dull day with the closest gunner on alert for air attack, although without an AA drum on his Bren. (IWM: H17594)

BELOW LEFT
An LRC of 161 (Green Howards) Recce crests a brow on a rural road in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland District's five-bar gate symbol is visible on the rear left mudguard, while the right mudguard carries the Recce tactical number. (TM: 2077/C3)

BELOW RIGHT
The view from behind the wheel, showing the driver's restricted vision even with his vision port open. With the port closed, the view was restricted to a narrow slit. (IWM: H25267)



Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) personnel servicing Mk IIIs of an unidentified unit in England. (Les Jackson)

cars had been used in the earliest phase of the campaign, as had the Morris light armoured car. Such vehicles made use of folds in the desert to protect their crews and execute their missions and there seems no valid reason why the LRC could not have done likewise by adopting hulldown positions.

When 51st (Highland) Reconnaissance Regiment arrived in Egypt, it also fell victim to this perception and, in common with 44 Recce, was re-roled for the final battle of El Alamein. Subsequently 56th (London) Division reached Egypt after the battle, but without its reconnaissance regiment; Eighth Army's commander, Lt Gen Montgomery, had decided that such regiments had no role in desert warfare and 56 Recce joined the recently formed 78th Division. LRCs shipped to Egypt were assigned to other duties.

Thus it was that the first combat use of the Humber LRC occurred at the far end of North Africa, following the Operation *Torch* landings in French north-west Africa in early November 1942. The first reconnaissance unit to arrive was 56 Recce, originally the 'eyes' of 56th Division but now, as we have seen, with 78th Division. Commanded by Lt Col Kendal Chavasse, the regiment initially deployed RHQ, B and C Squadrons.

Troops of 56 Recce led First Army's advance into Tunisia, as elements of the regiment probed to within 15 miles of Tunis before the advance was stopped on 10 December. Before then, however, Lt Graham Wheatley's 15 Troop of C Squadron became the first British soldiers to enter Tunisia and encounter the Germans in that country. Thus a Humber LRC Mk III was probably the first Allied AFV in Tunisia and certainly the first to see action. That action came when, following a 450-mile drive from Algiers, Wheatley was recce'ing beyond Djebel Abiod towards Bizerta. While probing forward, the patrol met its first Germans. With the contact reported to brigade HQ, Wheatley ordered his driver to turn the LRC about, since the enemy force included Pz IVs. Unfortunately, the road was very narrow and the driver overturned the LRC while reversing. The crew took cover in a ditch, intending to return to HQ after dark, but were betrayed by an Arab boy and captured.

Commander and gunner on alert for air attack with the 100-round AA drum fitted to the Bren. (TM: 2077/B6)

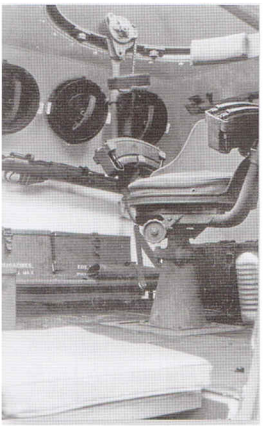
That the LRC was no match for tanks or German armoured cars was also made clear as Blade Force, led by RHQ and B Squadron 56 Recce, encountered enemy troops at El Aroussa. Two LRCs advancing to report on enemy dispositions were knocked out. Of the six men in those cars, only the troop commander, Lt Robinson, survived.

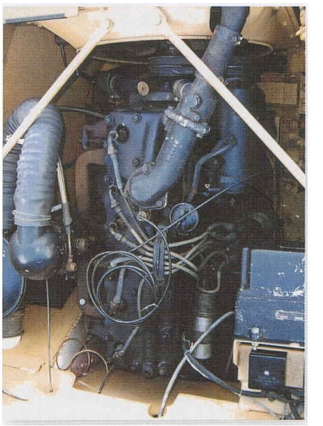
Over the following days the regiment acted as 78th Division's right-flank guard in its push towards Tunis. By early December, 78th Division was closing on the city but opposition was stiffening and 56 Recce patrols were encountering German eight-wheeled armoured cars, also reconnoitring, and anti-tank guns. The formidable SdKfz 231 armoured car, weighing some 8 tons, carried a 20mm gun while the LRC's armour offered no protection against 75mm and 88mm anti-tank guns. Nonetheless, patrols continued, with 56 Recce providing constant information. LRC crews employed speed, guile and tactical use of cover to complete their tasks.

First Army's advance was halted by hardening opposition and deteriorating weather, which reduced air support. The Luftwaffe had all-weather airfields and several LRCs and carriers were lost to strafing. However, when troops of 2nd Parachute Battalion were cut off by Axis forces near Sloughia, B Squadron was sent to rescue them. Defying heavy armour, the squadron reached the airborne soldiers and brought many out on LRCs and carriers. At much the same time, C Squadron was performing a 'hunt-and-destroy' role at Ksar Tyr. This, too, was successful and with the arrival of A Squadron in Tunisia the regiment ended the year knowing that it had acquitted itself well.

In 56 Recce's first period out of action, Lt Col Chavasse held a conference to discuss the lessons of those initial weeks of combat. Among the most important was the need for a heavier armoured car in the reconnaissance role. When this information was passed back to the War Office, a change in the equipment tables of recce regiments was implemented quickly, with the Humber armoured car joining its lighter stablemate in recce troops.

As the campaign continued, 56 Recce was joined by 46 Recce, 1 Recce, 4 Recce and 44 Recce. With 4 Recce came the Humber armoured car. The





FAR LEFT
The gunner's position with some internally stowed equipment visible, including a Lee-Enfield rifle and three 100-round AA drums for the Bren. (Les Jackson)

LEFT
The heart of the LRC, the 4.1-litre Humber petrol engine. This powerful 6-cylinder inline unit was simple to maintain in field conditions. (Les Jackson)

A Mk III showing the distinctive bulge behind the right mudguard that became necessary when four-wheel drive was introduced. The Boys rifle and Bren are obvious, the rear vision port is open and some tools are strapped to the rear locker. (Les Jackson)

HACs supplemented the LRCs, which continued to give sterling service, often at considerable cost to their crews. Although several different HACs joined the LRCs in reconnaissance regiments, the latter were never replaced completely. (HACs included several variants of the Humber and the nimble Daimler from British production lines, as well as US M8 Greyhounds and T17E1 Staghounds, the latter used only by Commonwealth forces.)

During the Kasserine battle in February 1943, one LRC of A Squadron 56 Recce had its armament upgraded considerably with the fitting of a 20mm aircraft cannon. This had been recovered from a Spitfire that had crashed near Medjez, with the adaptation carried out by a sergeant who was said to look 'like Desperate Dan', the Wild West cartoon character from the children's comic, *The Dandy*. Such was this NCO's stature that he could fire a Boys rifle from the hip with ease.

Shortly after this, A Squadron pursued retreating Axis forces while 46 Recce undertook similar duties. When, towards the end of the month, No. 6 (Army) Commando was threatened with encirclement and capture, 56 Recce went to its aid and retrieved the situation. In all these actions, LRCs played their parts well, although several were lost to mines or enemy fire. The danger from mines became such that a special night patrol formation was adopted, led by a searchlight-equipped HAC, followed by an LRC and a truck carrying two sappers. Such patrols were designed to combat beehive mines surrounded by a ring of Teller mines. Crews also sandbagged the unarmoured floors of their LRCs.

By the time the Tunisian campaign ended in May, the recce regiments had proved their mettle. The LRC had done its job well, but its limitations had been recognized quickly and the arrival of HACs in recce units boosted morale as well as effectiveness. However, one of the last actions in Tunisia brought a Military Medal (MM) to a sergeant of 4 Recce who commanded an LRC. When a patrol of heavy and light cars, under Lt Jack Wigham, was fired on by a German tank, Wigham's HAC was disabled:

> Sgt Smith dismounted from a light car and took up a forward position with a Bren and a total of 7 men. Four 3-ton lorries of enemy infantry approached, Sgt Smith withholding his fire until they were 100 yards away. He then opened

fire, the infantry dismounting and continuing to advance until driven off by further fire from Sgt Smith's Bren gun. Sgt Smith's actions undoubtedly saved the leading vehicles and their crews from destruction.

Following the Axis surrender in North Africa, HM King George VI visited his troops and the escort for the royal party was provided by 56 Recce. A troop of LRCs was assigned, with Lt Col Chavasse in his personal LRC, 'Faugh A Ballagh' (the Irish Gaelic motto of his parent regiment, the Royal Irish Fusiliers; appropriately, it translates as 'Clear the Way!'). Following an inspection of a guard of honour at the aerodrome where he landed, the King had tea before setting off in convoy with four LRCs, the fourth of which was 'Faugh A Ballagh'. Ahead lay a 50-mile journey along roads that were often lined with soldiers. Where troops were waiting the convoy stopped and the King shook hands with their commanders before driving past the men at 10mph.

Where there were no troops we had to go all out. The leading LRC touched 60mph at one time! Very difficult to control ... I drove 192 miles during the day. There and back twice over, standing up in 'Faugh A Ballagh' most of the time ... It was a good experience and an honour to the Regiment. Unique in the Reconnaissance Corps. The LRCs looked pictures, we had them especially painted.

Victory in North Africa was followed by Operation *Husky*, the invasion of Sicily on 10 July 1943. Only two recce regiments fought in Sicily, the now battle-hardened 56 Recce, and 5 Recce, which was seeing action for the first time. In this short, sharp campaign neither regiment, although operating in very difficult conditions – heat, narrow roads with lava walls and mountainous terrain – was found wanting. Near Catania on 20 July, a scout troop of 5 Recce ran into a strong German force and in the ensuing battle three men were killed including the section leader, Lt Sutcliffe. Although most of the vehicles were destroyed, one Sgt Fisher rallied the survivors and brought them to safety, as well as bringing back information on the enemy positions. He was awarded the MM.

A Humber Utility car and LRC Mk III 'somewhere in the Middle East'. No Boys rifle is carried, but note the containers on the nearside and the open radiator shutters. (Karl Martin)

When 5 Recce was given a defensive role, their success was due to the mobility of their LRCs, armoured cars and carriers. Before long the regiment had the measure of the enemy, with the reliability of the LRCs playing a major part in its success.

By 4 August, 5 Recce was again on the move, snapping at the heels of the retreating Germans. Patrols fought sharp engagements, including one in which an LRC of 2 Squadron...

> in backing after having drawn the enemy's fire, ran into a ditch. The vehicle at once became the target for the enemy's concentrated fire. The occupants could not escape ... because one door was jammed and the other was under fire from three German machine guns. L/Cpl E Trigg, who was commanding another LRC, at once brought his own vehicle up alongside the trapped car, shielding the occupants as they withdrew and engaging the enemy machine-gun nest. His gallantry and quick thinking were later rewarded with the Military Medal.

Maj Medley, commanding 1 Squadron, had a narrow escape when his LRC was blown up on a mine. Neither he nor Tpr Collins was injured and Medley, although blackened from the explosion to such an extent that even his teeth were black, climbed onto another LRC to continue leading his squadron's advance.

In a further action in the early hours of 5 August, 2 Squadron lost two vehicles to mines and ran into an enemy ambush. Although most of the ambushed vehicles were 'skilfully backed down a mile of road in pitch darkness out of danger', several men were killed or wounded. Meanwhile:

> the wireless operator of the leading [LRC], Trooper W E White, remained at his set, though under heavy fire, sending out messages to warn the Troops

D

LRC MK III OF 56 RECCE IN ACTION IN TUNISIA, 1943

In February 1943, No. 6 (Army) Commando was in danger of being overrun by Axis forces near Testour. At this stage in the campaign, the Allies had yet to gain the strategic advantage in Tunisia. However, elements of 56th Reconnaissance Regiment succeeded in rescuing No. 6 Commando and, in doing so, repeated an earlier achievement in December 1942 in which 56 Recce had rescued members of 2nd Parachute Battalion who had been cut off in the Sloughia area and were in danger of being captured.

In this illustration, an LRC of 56 Recce is seen supporting members of 6 Commando, who are wearing US Army steel helmets, a practice adopted by this and 1 Commando in the Tunisian campaign; both units had worn these helmets in deference to French sensitivities since landing in Operation *Torch*. In the distance, soldiers of the Hermann Göring Division, a Luftwaffe ground formation, may be seen withdrawing from the action as a result of the arrival of LRCs and carriers from 56 Recce. In the aftermath of this event, Lt Col Chavasse, CO of 56 Recce, received a personal letter from Adm Lord Louis Mountbatten, C-in-C Combined Operations, in which the latter expressed his thanks for 56 Recce's rescue of the commandos.

The LRC is finished in the camouflage scheme used in Tunisia: overall khaki-brown SCC 2, which, by February 1943, had become quite worn since 56 Recce's cars had seen considerable action since the regiment's arrival in Tunisia in November 1942. The white diamond on the side of the LRC indicates that it belongs to HQ Squadron, while the car commander is wearing the distinctive green beret adopted by the officers of 56 Recce when the regiment left the UK in late 1942. By now the regiment had also adopted the soubriquet 'Chavasse's Light Horse'. Lt Col Chavasse was awarded the DSO for his work on this occasion and later became the only officer of the Reconnaissance Corps to receive a Bar to the DSO. His personal car, M5641984, bore the Irish Gaelic name 'Faugh A Ballagh' ('Clear the Way!'), the motto of his parent regiment, the Royal Irish Fusiliers.

FAUGH A BALLAGH
5
41

at the rear of the column what was happening. It was only when his vehicle was set on fire by tracer bullets that he, himself, withdrew. For his gallantry on this occasion Tpr White later received the Military Medal.

In the closing days of the campaign, LRCs of 5 Recce entered Paterno only to find themselves in close contact with two self-propelled guns. The cars were extricated safely, but two LRCs were lost when hit from behind by a concealed 88mm Flak gun in another incident. These were the last of 13 LRCs lost by 5 Recce in the short campaign. Meanwhile, 56 Recce had also fought well, with its LRCs and HACs leading 78th Division's advance on Randazzo as the Germans undertook their evacuation to mainland Italy.

With the close of the Sicilian campaign, Allied attention turned to the Italian mainland. On 3 September, Eighth Army landed at Reggio in Calabria to advance through the 'foot' of Italy. Leading was 5 Recce, with the regiment's LRCs often well ahead of the main force as they probed in search of enemy positions. Yet the Germans intended to give up both Calabria and Puglia (the 'heel' of Italy) and opposition was lighter than expected. Much enemy effort was expended in cratering roads and demolishing bridges; one bridge was blown as the leading LRC of 3 Squadron approached the town of Lagonegro. With difficult terrain frequently making it impossible to leave the roads, sappers deployed with patrols to search for mines and construct diversions. Such were the distances involved that wireless communication was often difficult, while 'vehicles were beginning to feel the strain of the tremendous mileages imposed on them'. Nonetheless, it was 5 Recce that achieved the first link-up between troops of Eighth and Fifth Armies.

Fifth Army landed at Salerno on 9 September where, in contrast to Eighth Army's experience in Calabria, a fierce German counter-attack was launched. Two recce units were included in X (British) Corps of Fifth Army: 44 Recce and 46 Recce. A static battle lasting several days was fought before Fifth Army could advance. In the British sector, LRCs deployed with HACs in scout patrols, recce'ing for their divisions. Meanwhile 56 Recce had landed at Taranto to join Eighth Army and fought in the battle of Termoli in early October. The port was seized by a commando brigade while 56 Recce led 11 Brigade's advance. Patrols from 56 Recce pushed through Termoli to reconnoitre for the next phase of operations. One patrol, including LRCs and HACs, captured a despatch rider of 16. Panzer Division and learned that that formation was en route to Termoli to attack 78th Division. This was confirmed when other 56 Recce troops met armour of 16. Panzer. They returned with this intelligence, having avoided an unbalanced battle with the tanks, which neither LRCs nor HACs would have survived.

Moving across desert terrain, where the LRC was supposedly unsuitable, this car has radiator shutters open and wireless aerial clipped down. No Boys rifle is fitted and the Bren has no magazine. (TM: 2077/C5)

The battle that followed as 16. Panzer Division attacked Termoli was one in which there was no role for LRCs. This was an augury for much of the remainder of the Italian campaign. Such was the Italian terrain that the war became largely one for infantry and artillery. Reconnaissance regiments

HQ Squadron Mk IIIs of 56 Recce at the end of the Tunisian campaign. The CO's car, 'Faugh A Ballagh' ('Clear the Way!'), is second from right. M4651935 also bears a Gaelic inscription which cannot be deciphered clearly. (Author's collection via 56 Recce OCA)

found their roles changed, with 4 Recce deployed on portering duties and 44 Recce re-organized on a jeep, carrier and White scout car establishment.

Yet there were noteworthy exceptions, including two in the summer of 1944 as Allied armies in Italy broke the stalemate at Cassino and Anzio, liberated Rome and advanced northwards along the Tiber valley. With both Fifth and Eighth Armies through the Gustav and Hitler Lines, VI (US) Corps broke out of the Anzio beachhead in Operation *Buffalo*. In the British sector this breakout was led by Brettforce, based on 1 Recce, commanded by Lt Col Paddy Brett.

Operation *Buffalo* gave 1 Recce the opportunity to show its mettle in the reconnaissance role and Brett's men did so to good effect, using the agility of their LRCs to maintain contact with the retreating enemy and provide up-to-date intelligence. By now the regiment deployed Humber HACs, which worked in harmony with their lighter stablemates, and Dingo scout cars. Also involved in the breakout was 5 Recce, which pushed a squadron along the coastal route and another through the low foothills. Recce sections with LRCs and HACs probed ahead with 'everyone … in high spirits at the sudden action after weeks of static warfare. We were Recce in the true sense of the word, and it was going to take quite a lot to stop us.'

Rome was liberated on 4 June. Before long Allied troops were racing along both sides of the Tiber in pursuit of the Germans. Leading Eighth Army's advance was Chavasseforce, based on 56 Recce with armour and infantry – a full battalion of Royal Irish Fusiliers – included. Naturally, the LRCs were out in front, their crews checking for enemy strongpoints. Chavasseforce also protected the flank of 6th (South African) Armoured Division in a race from Orvieto to Lake Trasimeno that lasted nine days – one of the finest demonstrations of the versatility of the LRC in Italy. By the end of its nine-day run, Chavasseforce had accounted for 145 Germans dead, another 121 as prisoners and the destruction or capture of about 30 guns and mortars, 56 machine guns, over 30 vehicles and six two-man tankettes, as well as a German cinema unit.

And yet, after the battles along the Trasimene Line, and Operation *Olive*, intended to break through the Gothic Line, the campaign in Italy settled once again into the stalemate of positional warfare, with reconnaissance units

deploying as infantry. Although their LRCs had a much-reduced role, there were still opportunities for them, as the experience of 4 Recce on 10 August shows. On that day the regiment occupied heights overlooking the Arno river near Castellonchio.

> Following the enemy withdrawal, A and C Sqns pushed forward along very bad, narrow, dangerous roads, as usual well cratered and well mined. One LRC of C Sqn went up on a mine, but the crew, though shaken, were unhurt. (This same LRC and crew were shot up two days ago by a 75mm and the crew are still unscathed.) An HAC got stuck on an important but extremely narrow road, and was last heard of hanging half-over the edge blocking the road.

Later in the month, still during Operation *Olive*, 46 Recce was leading 139 Brigade's advance, pushing forward in spite of blown bridges and mined roads. The regiment was under constant shellfire throughout 27 August, suffering 13 wounded and having two HACs, an LRC and a 15cwt truck damaged. Nonetheless, the regiment continued its task, as did the other recce units in Italy. Not until April 1945 did those LRCs have another opportunity to move at speed in the recce role. That opportunity came with the final Allied offensive in Italy, launched on 9 April.

In Eighth Army's Operation *Buckland*, the German defensive line was cracked open in a massive attack that allowed a breakthrough force to advance towards the Argenta Gap. On 12 April, C Squadron 56 Recce was ordered to move with 36 Brigade, supported by tanks, to extend the bridgehead established by 8th Indian Division.

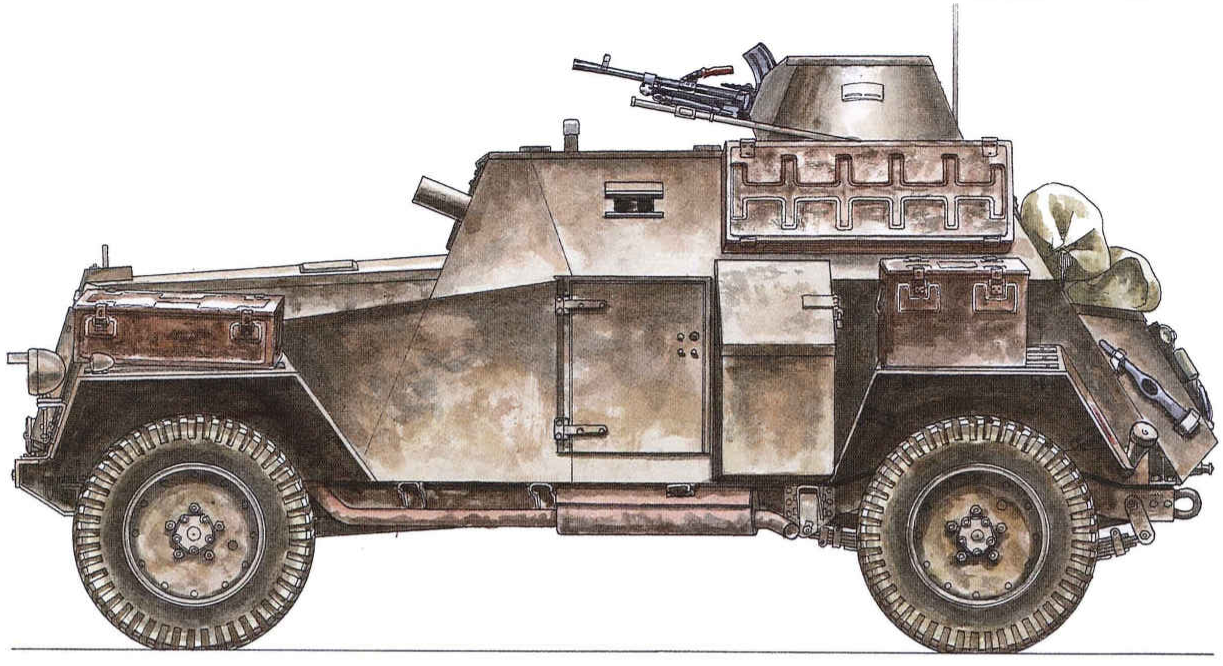
> Events then moved quickly and the Recce Sqdn with 36 Bde together with the tanks were given the job of capturing a group of houses known as Tre Casa, 1,000 yards beyond the most forward infantry of the Indian Div. Once they reached this objective they were to push on towards the village of Conselice, but this village proved to be a tough nut and subsequently had to be taken by infantry.

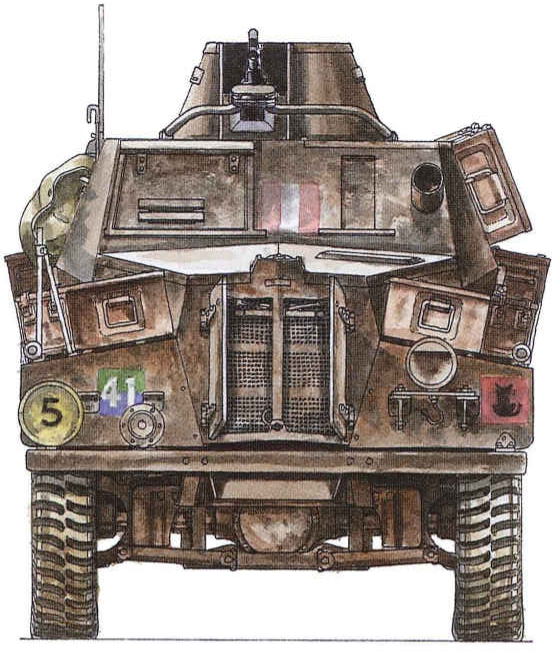
E

LRC MK III, 44 RECCE, ITALY, LATE 1943

When 44th Division was disbanded in Egypt, 44 Recce, which had fought as a carrier-equipped unit in a mine-clearing role at El Alamein, was transferred to 56th (London) Division. This latter formation had arrived in Egypt without its reconnaissance regiment (56 Recce) as Lt Gen Montgomery did not want such units in Eighth Army. Following brief service in Tunisia, 44 Recce took part in the invasion of Italy, landing at Salerno in September 1943, and fought through most of the subsequent campaign. Winter came early in Italy in 1943 and conditions were soon exceptionally difficult, with flooded rivers and streams and much mud, as shown by the state of this Mk III. Although recce patrols continued to be mounted, 44 Recce performed a wide range of other duties, including supporting artillery and engineers and even portering for infantry prior to the attack on Monte Camino in November. This car, still in its well-worn Tunisian camouflage scheme of SCC 2 khaki-brown, carries 56th Division's 'Black Cat' badge on front and rear left mudguards, with the Recce '41' on the right mudguards; bridge classification plates – a black 5 on a yellow disc – are also carried. In addition to ammunition boxes and jerrycans, the car is loaded with the crew's personal impedimenta.

Also shown are the divisional badges of both 56th and 78th Divisions. The former is a black cat, with its tail up, on a red background; this was said to represent Dick Whittington's cat. This badge would also have been carried by 56 Recce while it served with 56th (London) Division but, on active service with 78th Division, it carried the golden battleaxe on a black background that was the Battleaxe Division's sign. Both 44 Recce and 56 Recce served throughout the Italian campaign, with both taking part in Eighth Army's final offensive in April 1945.

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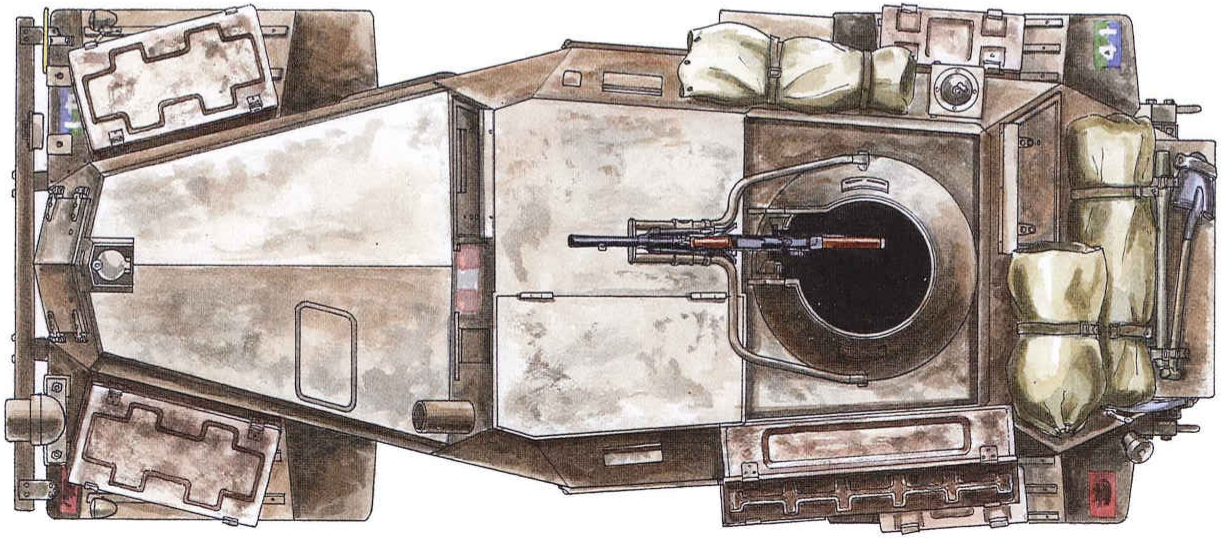


A heavily burdened Mk III of 56 Recce in Sicily, early August 1943. Only two recce units served in this brief campaign. (Author's collection via 56 Recce OCA)

At the same time, A and B Squadrons were mopping up and observing east of the Santerno River and south of Reno while also protecting 36 Brigade's right flank and preventing the escape of any Germans in the area. As the advance continued, 56 Recce experienced some of its heaviest-ever fighting, but the LRC crews faced the tough opposition with equanimity. By now the regiment's Humber HACs had been replaced by American M8 Greyhound armoured cars, which supported the LRCs in the advance. On 17 April the regiment came under the command of V Corps and over the following two days was engaged heavily: its squadrons took 57 prisoners, destroyed four tanks, shared in the destruction of a fifth and knocked out many AT guns. Once again, the LRC crews behaved with great courage, probing to detect enemy positions and bringing down fire on them, the crewmen as ever relying on the speed of the LRCs and their commanders' and drivers' skills, and wits, to survive their many skirmishes.

The regiment continued in action as the advance progressed and, although the end was in sight for the Allies, resistance was still fierce. At last, on 25 April, 78th Division was withdrawn and 56 Recce's war was over, after three hectic weeks of action during which its LRCs and their crews had answered every call made on them, whether for reconnaissance, flank protection or providing wireless links.

Also engaged in that final offensive was 56th (London) Division with 44 Recce. For these veterans of El Alamein, however, there was little action as they deployed on a miscellany of supporting duties. When, at last, C Squadron advanced to cover 169 Brigade's right flank, it met some opposition and 62 prisoners were taken. Two days later, on 29 April, C Squadron was left behind as the regiment crossed the Adige River to race for Venice. Although 44 Recce hoped to be the first Allied troops into the city, that hope was dashed when 169 Brigade reached Venice first but 'had the bridge over the Adige been completed at 1400 as planned the Regiment would have been first in Venice'. 'For us the breakthrough was disappointing, as the great number of blown bridges slowed us down so much that infantry often did the job faster, and consequently we were not employed as much as we should have liked.' Even the speed and agility of the Humber LRC could not compensate for the loss of the river crossings and thus 44 Recce were denied what would have been a much-vaunted prize.

North-West Europe

Normandy

Elements of two regiments came ashore on D-Day, 6 June 1944, but it was some time before their scout troops deployed. For 3 Recce, the opportunity for its LRCs was expected at the end of June, but determined resistance and heavy casualties kept 3rd Division pinned down. Not until the fall of Caen in early July did the regiment become responsible for 3rd Division's left flank along the Orne from Blainville to Hérouville. Patrols using LRCs and HACs were carried out on Shipyard Island.

Operation *Goodwood*, Montgomery's armoured offensive, saw B Squadron recce'ing towards Émiéville and south-west to Troarn, but heavy opposition stopped both probes. Once again, it was a case of neither LRCs nor HACs being a match for well-dug-in AT guns. As the Allies fought to close the Falaise Gap, the regiment saw considerable action. B and C Squadrons provided flank protection around Viessoix with a number of probes along the Vire–Tinchebray road, during which several LRCs and HACs fell victim to enemy fire. As the German defences crumbled, B and C Squadrons advanced on parallel routes to Tinchebray and Montsecret on 14 August. With the LRCs nosing ahead, and mines being avoided, C Squadron was able to move quickly along the last mile to Tinchebray.

During this time the regiment developed a close liaison with the American 102 Mechanized Cavalry Group. As they closed on Tinchebray, the US commander wagered a Greyhound armoured car that his men would reach there first. He was not held to the wager by 3 Recce's CO when C Squadron beat their allies. En route to Montsecret, B Squadron could move fairly quickly but, under observation from high ground, came under heavy fire that held their advance on the river line. The squadron leader was wounded fatally.

Then came the regiment's final act in the battle of Normandy, with the LRCs able to show their speed as A and C Squadrons moved ahead, since the infantry had lost contact with the retreating Germans. C Squadron liberated Flers in what the regiment described as a pure recce job. Many prisoners were taken and 2nd Northamptonshire Yeomanry, 11th Armoured Division's reconnoitrers, were not best pleased to find that the recce LRCs and HACs had beaten them to Flers. Gen Sir Richard O'Connor, commanding VIII Corps, visited the regiment, congratulating them on their achievements. The regiment's historian noted that:

> So ended our part in the battle of France. It had not taken exactly the form ... we had expected – there had been more holding and

56 Recce operated LRCs throughout the Italian campaign. The regiment fought in Eighth Army's final operation, the smashing of the Argenta Gap and the advance to the Po. This Mk III, festooned with kit, poses beside a sign for Argenta on 18 April 1945 with another Mk III immediately behind. With no threat of air attack, the Bren carries a 30-round magazine. (Author's collection via 56 Recce OCA)

less mobile work than we had hoped for. But the principles laid down by the Colonel early in the summer of 1943 that we must be flexibly minded and prepared to take on any jobs given to us were amply justified.

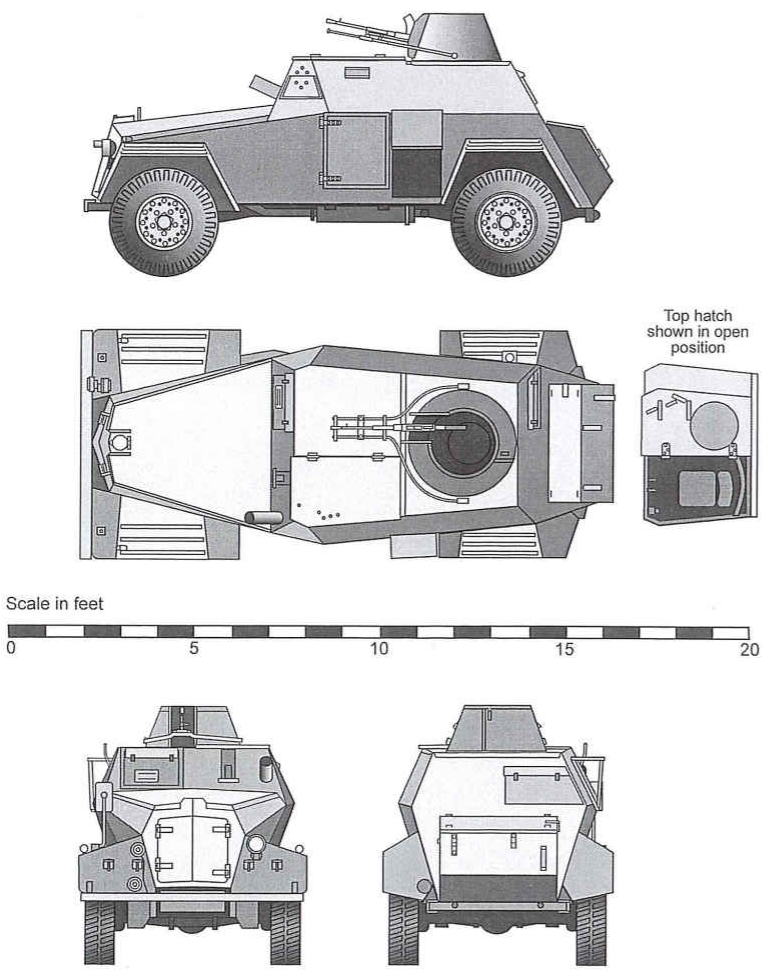
In those jobs the LRC had been one of the principal assets that allowed the regiment to act flexibly and take on any task assigned to it.

The other regiment to come ashore on D-Day, 61 Recce of 50th Division, provided beachhead contact detachments. In addition, the regiment formed an assault unit to join 8 Armoured Brigade in a planned breakout towards Villers-Bocage but, when this came to naught, the regiment switched to normal recce work. When, with resistance stiffening, both LRCs and HACs deployed as MG posts before their crews re-deployed as infantry, their divisional commander told the reconnoitrers that 'This isn't really your job. I want you for recce'ing the crossings over the Seine.'

Before long the regiment resumed its normal role and the LRCs probed ahead. Near Amayé-sur-Seulles, B Squadron outflanked strong enemy defensive positions to push into the village and surprise the Germans. Near Le Plessis-Grimoult, Lt Williams came on a rival unit's armoured cars whose crews had stopped because of suspicious-looking clods of earth on the road. When they said that these might be mines, Williams dismounted, lifted the clods, threw them to one side, and led his patrol on. LRC crews seemed to have a better appreciation of what lay before them than those in heavy armoured cars.

Humber LRC Mk III four-view plans. Based on the plans in *British Armoured Fighting Vehicles* by George Bradford. (Tim Webster)

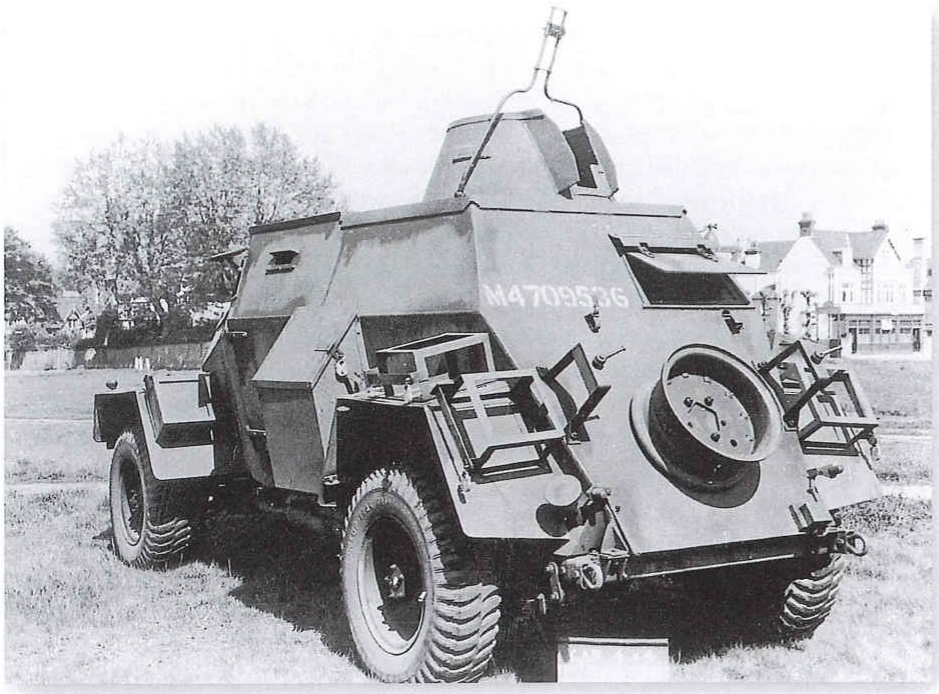
Light Reconnaissance, Humber, Mk III



As Allied forces in Normandy expanded, additional recce regiments arrived. Most included LRCs in their equipment tables, an exception being 6th Airborne Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment. Those equipped with the faithful Humber LRC included 15 (Scottish), 43 (Wessex), 49 (West Riding), 53 (Welsh) and 59 (Staffordshire). By now, as the history of 15 (Scottish) Recce indicates, LRCs were outnumbered by HACs; the regiment had only 24 LRCs against 28 HACs. Each regiment fought in the battle for Normandy and in the breakout that launched the Allied armies on their way through France.

During Operation *Bluecoat*, which began on 30 July, 15 Recce carried out a mopping-up operation. That afternoon:

Capt Fordyce was bringing B Squadron headquarters forward



A new Mk IIIA on display, showing open vision ports, stowage facilities and spare-wheel hub. Also clear is the distinctive pattern of the Dunlop Trak run-flat tyres. (TM: 210/A4)

> to join Major Gordon when the [LRC] in which [he] was travelling ahead of the other vehicles 'brewed up' on a mine. He and his crew got out, but with only his pistol to engage the Germans who appeared on the other side of the road. Tpr P Walker, the wireless operator, and Trooper A Richardson, the driver, were killed, and Capt Fordyce, who tried to cover their withdrawal, was wounded.

This was typical of the many engagements in which LRC crews found themselves.

On the night of 3–4 August a patrol of 53 Recce under Sgt Robbie Robinson brought back news of the enemy withdrawal from the crossroads at Le Bon Repos. On the 4th a recce patrol was despatched to the crossroads and beyond. Cpl May, the gunner of the LRC leading the patrol, described the experience.

> The Troop Sergeant was to be in command and with Trooper Crosier, my driver, we crept over the brow of the hill at zero hour to see a large open expanse of shell-pitted ground with many knocked-out tanks and vehicles scattered about ... my first thought was whether my car would add to this collection. Then I distinctly remember praying that I should do my best whatever happened for I had never felt quite so frightened before. Our progress was slow but we edged down the narrow road, dodging a partly-demolished carrier and bumping over shell-holes. Still, nothing happened to us and I felt easier. Then I observed a kind of road barrier some 300 yards ahead which I kept well covered with my Bren. Suddenly Crosier applied his brakes and said that he thought he saw traces of mines in the road only ... a few yards in front. Our Commander dismounted and was confirming these suspicions when a dirty piece of material was waved from the barrier by an equally dirty individual who later became our first prisoner. We felt proud to have accomplished at least one of our missions.
>
> ... we continued through the now harmless minefield and past the barrier into the shell-torn village of Esquay. I wirelessed back that we had reached the first objective and we moved on, keeping a constant watch on the ruins for snipers.

Sgt Robinson had been left in command of 7 Troop, an assault troop, and had orders

> to pass on through Esquay and take the road to Evrecy. We advanced through Esquay and continued for about a half mile, No 7 Troop leading with the two [LRCs] eighty yards behind. When 7 Troop came abreast of a large field of ripening corn, two small tanks and three armoured troop-carrying half-tracks came dashing out of a small copse some 300 yards away, making for the road we were on. As we had no A/T weapons with us ... I yelled for the Troop to take cover in the cornfield. They needed no second invitation and in a matter of seconds had disappeared in the corn. Both cars loosed off a few rounds and then they realised they were outnumbered and outgunned, and withdrew, making for ... Esquay. From the cornfield we had a good all round view and could see some Churchill tanks coming over the Ridge with A Sqn's recce cars and carriers in front. Jerry could also see what was happening and decided to apply that well-known axiom: 'He that fights and runs away lives to fight another day'.

The Wessexmen of 43 Recce received orders for their first true recce task on the morning of 3 August. B and C Squadrons were to advance on two axes, with B Squadron on the Jurques–Ondefontaine road and C the Jurques–Le Mesnil-Auzouf–La Tautainerie road. Tiger tanks on high ground overlooking the line of march delayed B Squadron until RAF Typhoons attacked the German tanks. However, a subsequent probe by 6 Troop found the Tigers still in position and B Squadron had to wait until infantry took the hill on which the tanks were ensconced. Meanwhile, C Squadron by-passed the Tigers on an alternative route. From Le Mesnil-Auzouf the squadron moved down the road to Montcharivel where German troops engaged them. Initial small-arms and MG fire was augmented by mortars as the squadron's carriers moved up to form a firm base that allowed the LRCs and HACs to probe into Montcharivel. There they met heavy MG and mortar fire, which pinned them down, but the arrival of four Churchills and infantry allowed the cars to withdraw to safety.

Lt George Cooper, Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit, talks with Capt R. T. Miller, his brother-in-law, on Miller's LRC Mk III, of an unidentified Canadian unit, near Caen in July 1944. (NA Canada: PA-140189: Lt Michael M Dean)

German mortars were very much in evidence, as 10 Troop discovered when Lt Davies took his cars past La Tautainerie towards Vory, just short of which they came under sustained mortar fire. They took cover in farm buildings and tried to locate the mortar positions. The squadron's assault troop was also under mortar fire at La Tautainerie, which they had taken over, and Lt Richardson was wounded. Subsequently, the troop was forced to abandon the position. Likewise, Davies' 10 Troop had to withdraw when darkness fell. They 'drove back over the crossroads with houses blazing around them and bullets whistling by'. In such circumstances, many had cause to be grateful for the run-flat tyres on the LRCs.

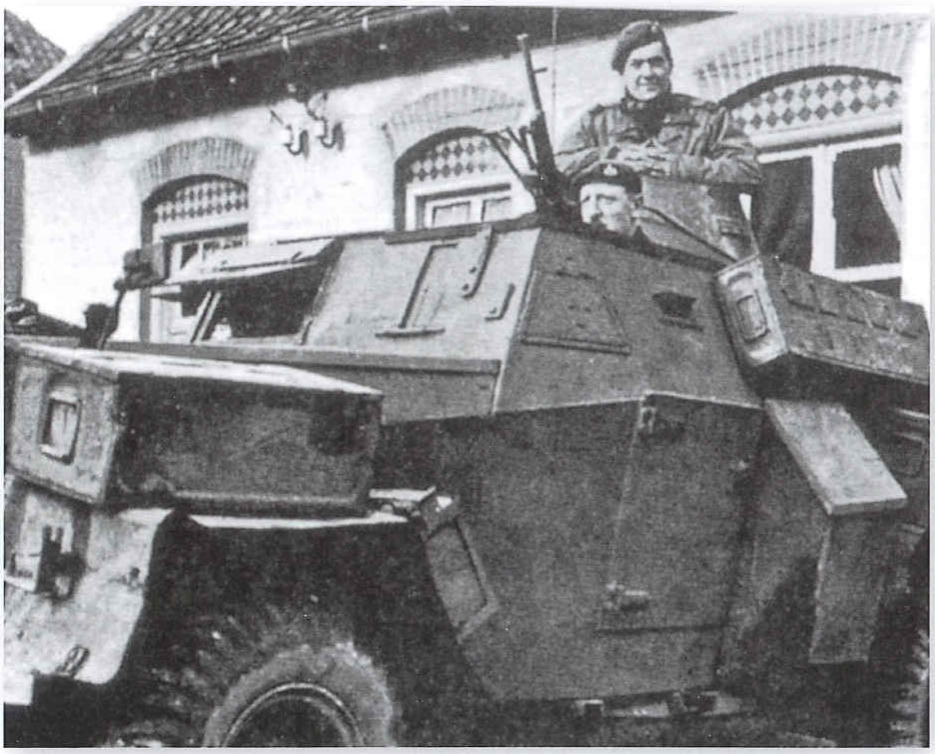
At the end of its run that day, B Squadron's leading troop met part of C Squadron's assault troop close to La Tautainerie. During its run B Squadron had several encounters with the enemy, including an unpleasantly close one when a troop was attacked by two Panther tanks; an armoured car and the carriers had to be abandoned. Lt Scarr's 6 Troop pushed on until they met C Squadron's assault troop. En route, Scarr's men secured a junction on the road to Le Mesnil-Auzouf. The leading troops were pulled back for the night as darkness fell, bringing 43 Recce's first day in action to an end.

Similar skirmishes were experienced by patrols of 59 Recce, which went into action at the beginning of August but was disbanded before the month was out. In the advance towards Falaise, the regiment protected 59th Division's right flank, with patrols of LRCs and HACs searching all roads up to the right boundary. On 11 August LRCs and HACs of 59 Recce penetrated to the centre of Thierry-Harcourt, while following infantry secured the town. Apart from A Squadron, the regiment went into Army Reserve on the 20th. A Squadron continued reconnoitring to the Falaise–Argentan road and carried out mopping-up operations in that area, the scene of 59 Recce's last action.

Breakout from Normandy

With the breakout from Normandy came the opportunity for greater use of the LRCs and their heavier brothers. On 24 August LRCs, HACs and scout cars of 15 (Scottish) Recce began their race to the Seine. The regimental history comments that:

> The regiment had trained to be a Jack of many trades, and a Jack of many trades it was to be in the dust of Normandy, the green Bocage, swiftly covered miles of Northern France, Belgium and Germany, and the mud of a Dutch winter and the Siegfried Line. But above all, in training and in action, its name



Summer 1944, and a heavily laden Mk IIIA of an unidentified Reconnaissance Corps unit pauses in a Norman town. (Karl Martin)

was its purpose, and for most of the campaign the basis of its reconnaissance was the Humber car – the bulky armoured car and the long-nosed light reconnaissance car with its Bren ... Each of the three reconnaissance squadrons had three car troops (each of three armoured cars and two light cars), three tracked carrier troops (each of seven carriers) and an assault troop (four sections equipped as infantry and carried in halftracks).

Speed was restricted due to the need to clear debris from the roads, a task accomplished by sapper units. In this manner, the squadrons advanced through Le Sap, Vimoutiers, Bernay, Beaumont-le-Roger, Le Neubourg and Barquet before reforming in the Louviers area. Patrols that reached the bank of the Seine were swamped by delirious civilians who covered the LRCs and HACs with flowers and their crews with wine, fruit and kisses.

Once the Seine had been crossed the race continued, although there was slight opposition. A Squadron was helping to enlarge 46 Brigade's bridgehead when the leading LRC of 1 Troop, commanded by Cpl Whiting, came under MG and mortar fire on the edge of Fretteville. Fire was returned and the patrol moved to its left, only to meet further strong opposition. Whiting's car was blown up but, contrary to orders, he worked for 45 minutes to recover it under fire and patrolled in it for the rest of the day. Other patrols intercepted German reinforcements approaching the forward positions. But the most spectacular action in this phase had to be 'the charge of the Litton Brigade'.

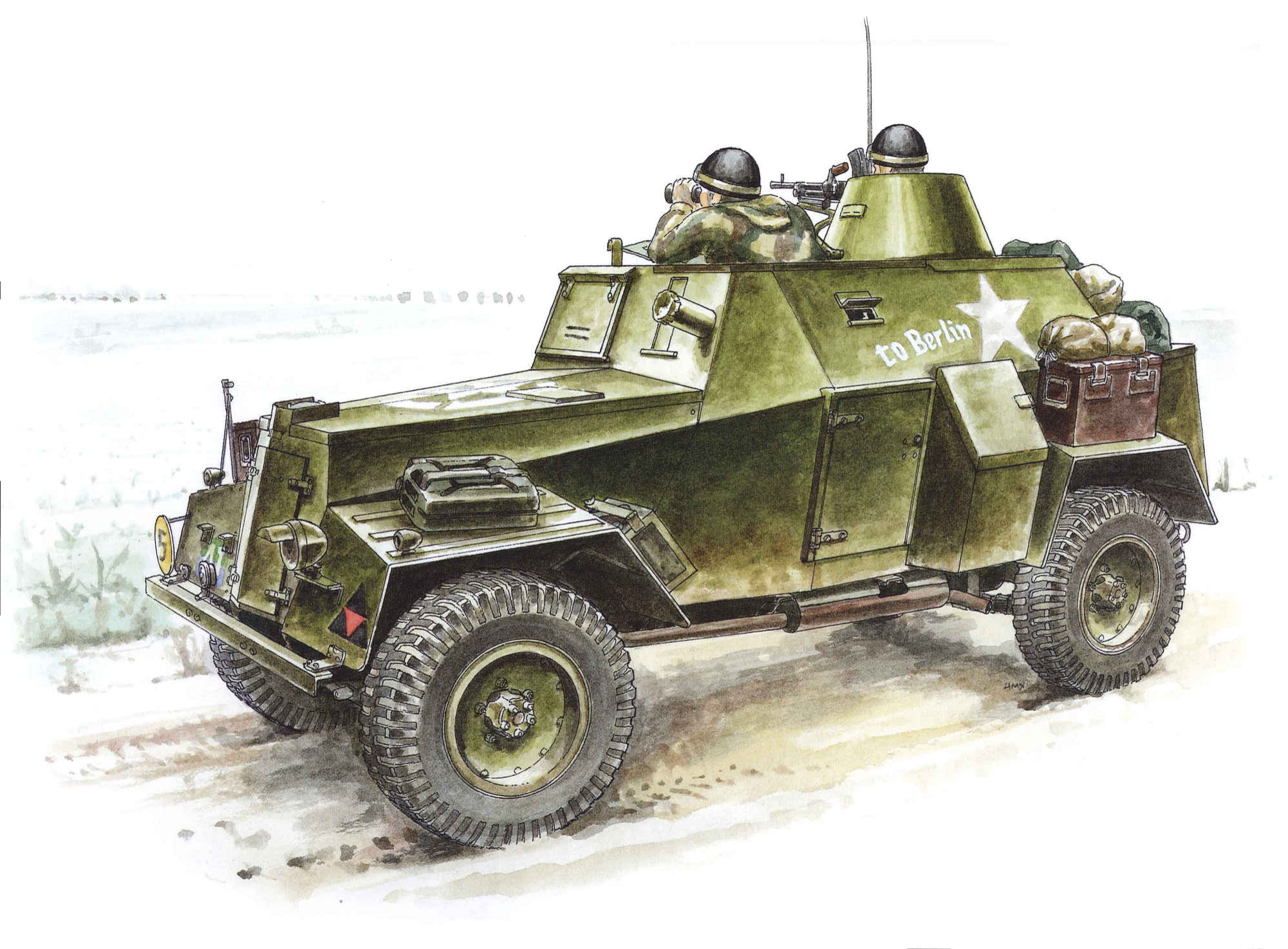
Two Mk IIIAs of No. 2806 Armoured Car Squadron RAF Regiment here act as a forward observation post not far from Eindhoven. RAF roundels adorn the bonnets, sides and mudguards, with the Allied liberation armies' white star also displayed prominently. (IWM: CL1396)

F

HUMBER LRC MK III, 3 (RNF) RECCE, NORTH-WEST EUROPE, OCTOBER 1944

The car depicted, M4652164, was lost to a mine during a patrol near Overloon in the Netherlands in October 1944. This Mk III belonged to A Squadron of 3 Recce, formerly 8th Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, hence the 'RNF' in its title. As HQ 3rd Division had been concerned that a German counter-attack was being planned, the patrol deployed to gather information. Unfortunately, M4652164 drove into a minefield where it was damaged so badly that it had to be abandoned. The commander was killed and the other two crew members were seriously injured.

Most Reconnaissance Corps LRCs in North-West Europe were finished in khaki-green G3 camouflage and carried the Allied liberation armies' air recognition symbol: a five-pointed white star, on the bonnet surrounded by a broken circle and without the circle on either side of the body. This was in addition to the divisional symbol of 3rd Division, often known as the 'Bass triangle', the standard Recce '41' and the bridge classification plate. M4652164 is believed to have carried the slogan 'To Berlin' as shown and a non-standard wooden case on the rear, in place of the usual equipment container, may also have been a feature. In the flat countryside near Overloon, LRCs were at risk from AT guns, *Panzerfäuste*, and mines. Crews adopted the practice of covering the LRC's mild-steel floor with sandbags to provide some blast protection against mines, but this had only limited value. The body of M4652164 is on display at Overloon Museum, but it is minus its front and rear mudguards and carries divisional and Recce signs on the radiator shutters and body sides that have been painted on by the museum.


to Berlin

Near Les Andelys, Sgt Litton's patrol of B Squadron, an LRC and an HAC, had an unforgettable experience:

> Owing to slight error in map reading and the unexpected appearance of the A Squadron cars, Sgt Litton's party had failed to recognise the forward infantry positions, and driving on, had realised too late that its support was no longer close behind. Soon after the cars came under machine-gun and anti-tank fire, but their speed carried them through it. The road was too narrow for them to reverse out of danger or to turn round. There was only one way open – forward. Both cars increased speed.
>
> Going round a bend in the road, the light reconnaissance car, leading, was confronted by a large anti-tank gun. One gunner was resting against the gun shield, the others were gathered round a stationary truck on the other side of the road. The Bren in the [LRC] was fired at the truck and the gun crew, and a quick shot from the heavy car's 37mm hit the German gun. The crew dived underneath the truck, which, however, was driven off at high speed. In this chaos the two B Squadron cars were able to turn round and race for home, after looking down into Les Andelys and seeing that the town was full of enemy.
>
> The way back was under the heavy fire of Germans who were by now very much on the alert. The light car, with one of its front wheels shot off, wobbled the last hundred yards to A Squadron on three flat tyres and a brake drum, and the heavy lurched in with three flat tyres, all riddled. The crews were safe.

The loss of a front wheel was not an immediate problem as momentum would have maintained the car's balance, keeping the brake drum off the ground, as demonstrated today by Formula 1 drivers. However, as the car slowed it would have begun wobbling, as described, with the brake drum eventually settling to the ground. Fortunately, the LRC was on safe territory by the time that happened. Rarely was the value of run-flat tyres demonstrated so effectively.

When the Germans were seen evacuating Les Andelys, Lt Blount's troop raced to the village and secured it before the infantry arrived. Elsewhere, A Squadron met up with a patrol from 43 Recce as LRCs and HACs swept the countryside for retreating Germans. Another patrol, scouting into terrain outside the divisional boundary, was fired on by British troops of 11th Armoured Division. B Squadron was also active while C Squadron lost an LRC when a patrol ran into a German strongpoint just beyond Écouis; the car commander was killed. Soon after this 7th Armoured and 53rd (Welsh) Divisions took over the pursuit. The CO of 15 Recce noted in a Special Order of the Day that:

LAC Leslie Bassett, No. 2777 Field Squadron RAF Regiment, mans his AA-drum configured Bren while watching for possible Luftwaffe intruders as his unit protects landing ground B89 in the Netherlands. Note the stowed jerrycans, the TAF/84 sign of No. 84 Group 2nd Allied Tactical Air Force (TAF), and Hawker Typhoon fighter-bombers of No. 257 Squadron dispersed on the airfield. (IWM: CL2102

LAC Bassett's Mk IIIA again with the other two crewmen outside the vehicle on a very dull, wet day. The car is dug into a shallow scrape. (IWM: CL2103)

> Since 27 Aug, when the Regiment for the first time was able to get on its proper role, 15 (S) Division has advanced over 50 miles, crossed the major obstacle in France, the River Seine, and driven the enemy back much faster than he wished ... A great deal of the credit for this rapid advance is due to the excellent information obtained by the patrols of the Regiment.

The divisional commander sent a message congratulating 'Patrol Commanders and their crews, particularly those whose reports hastened very materially the crossing of the River Seine, [and] the subsequent rapid advance of the British Second Army'.

That rapid advance slowed as autumn arrived and the Allied armies reached the German frontier. Much bitter fighting ensued in the Low Countries and, yet again, recce units were limited in what they could do. In mid-October, when HQ 3rd Division believed that a German flank attack was imminent, a patrol of A Squadron 3 Recce was despatched to gather information. During that mission, the patrol lost an LRC that drove into a minefield and was damaged so badly that it had to be abandoned. The car commander was killed and the other two crew members were injured seriously. Yet again, the vulnerability of the LRC to mines had been demonstrated. By now, however, the number of LRCs in front-line service had decreased considerably and the car was being replaced gradually by HACs and scout cars. The latter were especially agile: Daimler's Dingo had a forward–reverse transfer gearbox allowing it to be driven in either direction over its full speed range, a feature shared with the Daimler armoured car. Some redundant LRCs found new roles: one Mk III was modified as a command car for the GOC of 43rd Division, Gen Ivor Thomas, and was a distinctive sight with its turret removed and pistol ports cut in the front quarter panels. Others were used by Gunner Forward Observation Officers (FOOs).

Throughout the hard winter of 1944–45, LRCs continued to give sterling service, although their numbers were decreasing, often to single figures in a regiment. An example of the quality of that service came in the Netherlands on 25 November, when 227 Brigade of 15th (Scottish) Division resumed the advance to the Maas River:

Through the Reichswald: a Mk III of 15 Recce struggles in the mud. (Author's collection)

C Squadron, being still the only one on the Sevenum side of Skye's obstructing mud, again led the way. This time white flags hung from the church and other buildings of Tienraij; the Germans had withdrawn to the outskirts of Swolgen, a mile farther on, where the patrol contained them until the Gordons came up with the tanks of 6 Guards Armoured Brigade. Lieut David Richford, who had succeeded to Lieut Gray's command when Lieut Gray became captain and joined the RHQ staff, took his cars to the outskirts of Broekhuizervorst on the banks of the river. The enemy was strong here. Sergeant Millroy's light car, in the lead, came under fire from a house, and a bazooka narrowly missed the rear wheels. Backing, the car went into a ditch. 'Bale out,' said Lieut Richford on the wireless. 'Bale out be ...,' said the old cavalryman, 'I've got a thousand fags in here and they're not for the bloody Jerries'. So he laid smoke, and under its cover another car dashed up and fixed a tow rope to the one in the ditch while Sgt Millroy himself ran up to the house from which the fire was coming and pitched grenades through a window. Another position he attacked with his Bren, and the patrol supported infantry

G

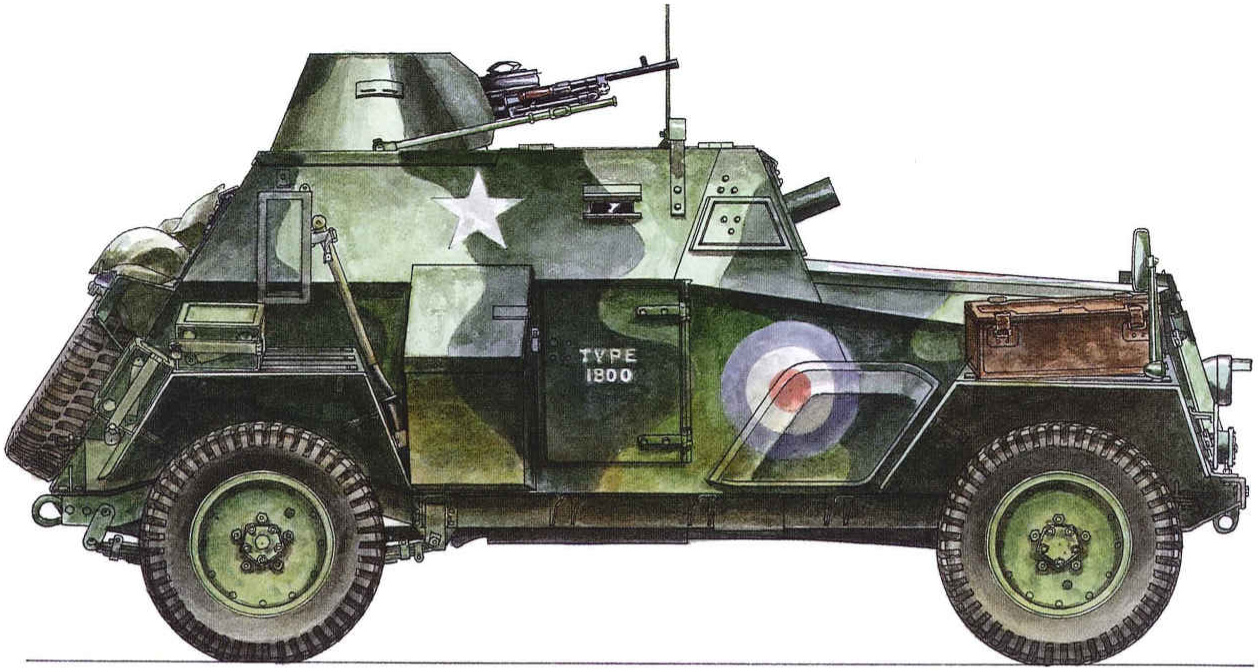
HUMBER LRC MK IIIA, RAF REGIMENT, NORTH-WEST EUROPE, 1944

After the Reconnaissance Corps, the RAF Regiment, formed in 1942 for airfield protection, was the next-largest operator of LRCs. In the North-West Europe campaign, LRCs of the RAF Regiment's field squadrons supported 2nd Tactical Air Force by defending its forward landing grounds, recce'ing for such locations and providing observation posts (OPs).

RAF Regiment LRCs were finished in a two-tone camouflage scheme of light-green G4 and dark-green G5 with both RAF roundels and the Allied white star as air recognition signs. The roundels, a red centre disc surrounded by a white circle and a blue circle, were painted on top of the bonnet, on the engine-compartment sides and the left mudguards, while the white stars were applied to the front plate between commander's and driver's hatches and on the upper side panels. There were no broken circles surrounding the stars.

As a Mk IIIA, the car does not have a rear stowage bin and hence the spare tyre is on the rear panel. Mk IIIAs were fitted with side pannier-style bins instead. Additional vision ports were also included on the front quarter panels.

A plethora of additional markings was carried by RAF cars, including the type number, 1800, on the side doors, the legend 'right hand drive no signals' on the rear left mudguard and the designation TAF/84 (for Tactical Air Force, No. 84 Group, which, with No. 83 Group, formed 2nd Tactical Air Force) on the right side of the upper rear panel. Air Ministry census numbers were painted on the left front mudguard and left side of the upper rear panel. The car depicted, RAF130930, served with No. 2777 Field Squadron.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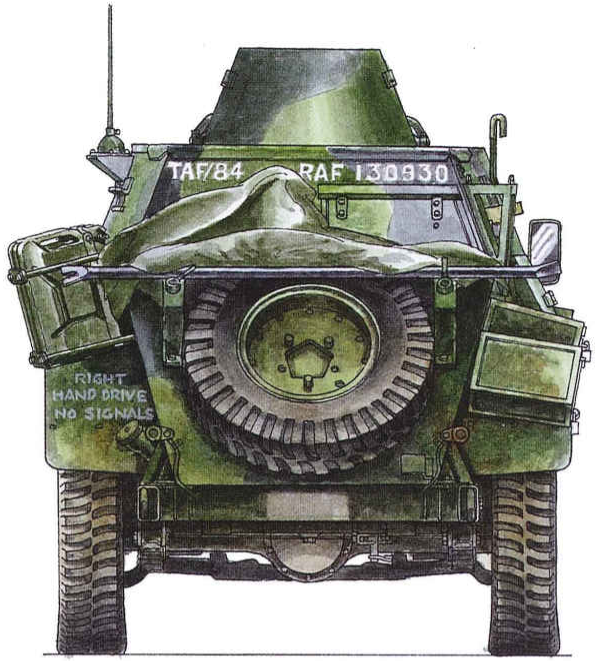
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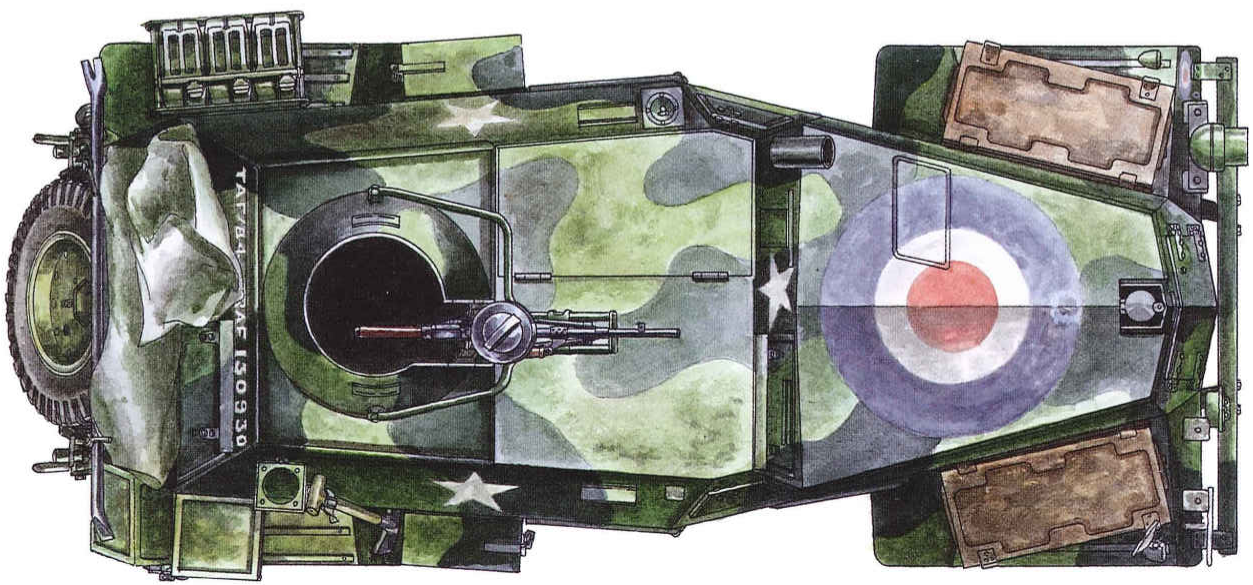

TAF/84 RAF 130930

RAF

R.A.F. REGIMENT

ABOVE
Some LRCs were adapted to other uses, including this modified Mk III, in use as a command car by Gen Ivor Thomas, GOC of 43rd Division. The turret has been removed and pistol ports have been cut in the quarter panels. (Les Jackson)

ABOVE RIGHT
Hamburg, 4 May 1945, and the crew of this LRC, of either 15 or 53 Recce, relax and feed the pigeons. These crewmen have replaced their Bren with a German MG42. (IWM: BU5254)

storming the strong-point. Sgt Millroy received an immediate award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Then, in February 1945, during 43 Recce's advance in Operation *Veritable*, 7 Troop of B Squadron was the first element of the regiment to enter the Reichswald, but encountered stiff opposition at Materborn village, which was captured subsequently by infantry. When 6 Troop took over the lead, with support from tanks, and the cars moved forward, they came under attack from MGs and *Panzerfäuste* at Niederdam. Two HACs were knocked out as well as an LRC, and several men were captured. With the tanks also suffering, B Squadron was withdrawn. Two days later, the CO, Lt Col C. H. Kinnersley, used his LRC to drive a war correspondent along the Cleve–Calcar road. Kinnersley ordered his driver to take the car through the forward infantry positions, at which point the LRC attracted the attention of German gunners and came under heavy artillery fire. No doubt the war correspondent was not short of copy for articles on the front.

LRCs took part in the Rhine crossing in late March – Operation *Plunder* – and in the final advance to victory. Those cars still in service had seen much action and, in truth, were obsolete but had served their purpose well, and their crews had considerable affection for them. With the rundown of the Reconnaissance Corps in the aftermath of war, the once-ubiquitous Humber LRC became a less common sight, but its name and image were forever to be associated with the corps it had served so well.

Some LRCs saw active service in the post-war years, including with 1 Recce in Palestine during the bitter campaign that marked the end of the British mandate. To escort trains, 1 Recce mounted HACs and LRCs on railway flatcars but this was countered by Jewish fighters breaking the wagon couplings. In one such incident, a trooper was killed by the runaway wagon. To counter this tactic, at least one LRC was modified and fitted with flanged rail wheels, in which form it escorted trains by travelling under its own power along the rails.

Farewell to the Reconnaissance Corps

With the end of the war, the Reconnaissance Corps was to be disbanded, its functions reverting to divisional cavalry regiments. The corps' formal end was marked by a parade at the Reconnaissance Training Centre, Catterick, on 3 January 1946, during which its flag was 'trooped' by an officer mounted in an LRC, escorted by two other LRCs. The parade then marched past the

Vehicles of 49 Recce, including one very tidy Mk III, wait by the roadside for the order to move into Utrecht. (NA Canada: PA128945: J. Ernest DeGuire)

district commander before the corps flag was hauled down and that of the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC) hauled up. Thus the Humber LRC was chosen to represent the spirit of the Reconnaissance Corps as it passed into history. It was a fitting role, as the vehicle had come to symbolize the Reconnaissance Corps in the eyes not only of those who served in it, but also those who relied on its work during the war years.

OTHER USERS

RAF Regiment

The other main user of the LRC was the Royal Air Force Regiment. Formed on 1 February 1942 to protect RAF air bases, a task the Army was unable to undertake in addition to its many other duties, the regiment eventually numbered over 50,000 men in more than 200 squadrons. Since the RAF had a tradition of operating armoured cars, existing armoured car companies were absorbed into the new regiment. In fact, some of the improvised AFVs of 1940, such as the Beaverette, had served with the RAF prior to the formation of the RAF Regiment. Following the invasion of mainland Europe, RAF Regiment units equipped with Humber LRCs deployed to defend forward landing grounds of the tactical air forces, as well as reconnoitring as the tactical air forces sought new airstrips close behind the advance of the ground forces. The LRCs also acted as ground liaison with fighter-bombers.

A Mk IIIA of No. 2777 Squadron RAF Regiment pictured in July 1945. The white stars and roundels have gone, but the car has an interesting, apparently bulletproof windscreen in front of the commander, plus an unidentified device between the commander and the gunner. (Les Jackson)

Royal Navy

There is one known instance of an LRC Mk III serving with the Royal Navy, albeit unofficially. When 56 Recce arrived in Algiers during Operation *Torch*, Lt Col Kendal Chavasse, the CO, discovered that one of his younger brothers, Lt Cdr Paul Chavasse DSC, was on the HQ ship HMS *Bulolo* in Algiers harbour. Both went to watch the unloading of the regiment's equipment, during which an LRC was dropped into the harbour. 'Paul asked me what I was going to do about it. I replied that I could not wait for it to be recovered

Mk III of HQ 1st Polish Armoured Division on parade in the Low Countries, May 1946. (Les Jackson)

as we must get cracking for Tunis as soon as possible. I told Paul that as far as I was concerned he could have it.'

The car was recovered, dried out, cleaned and prepared for use by Royal Navy officers. It is believed that this may have included the stencilling of the letters 'RN' on the vehicle but, unfortunately for its would-be operators, a German bomb put an end to their plans when it struck the LRC during an air raid on Algiers.

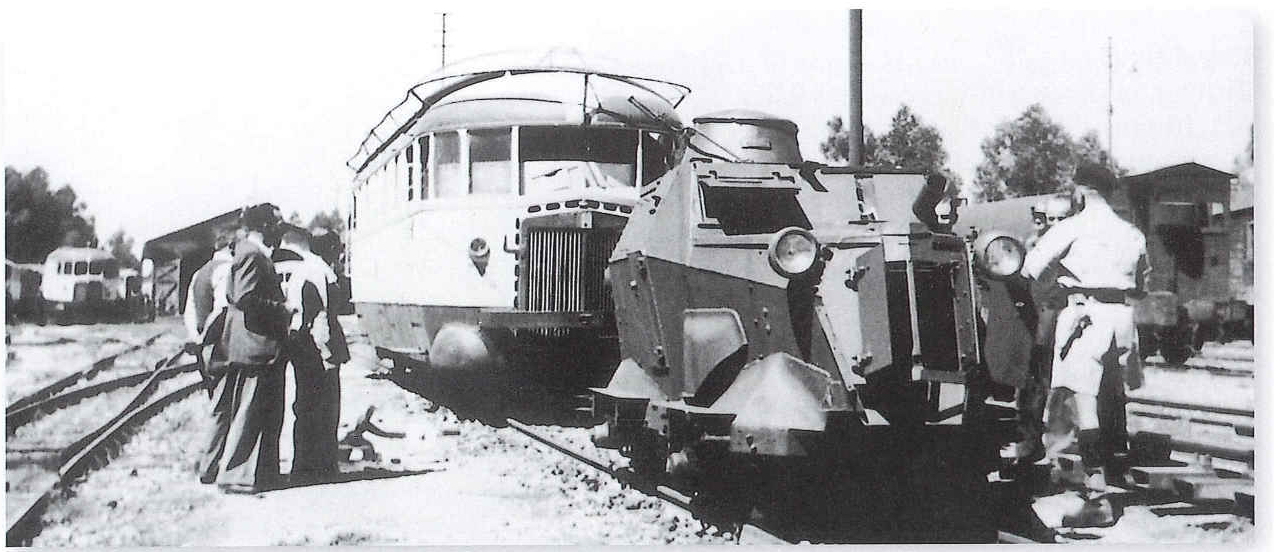
Other Allied nations

Among Allied forces to deploy the LRC were the Canadians, Czechs and Poles. Created in the UK in 1943, 1 Czech Armoured Brigade included elements of the Czech Division that had served in the French Army of 1940 and Czech units that had fought in the Middle East. In August 1944, the brigade joined 21 Army Group in France and, in October, relieved 154 (Highland) Brigade in the siege of Dunkirk. There it served until the end of the war, when the siege ended. Its reconnaissance unit fielded Humber LRC Mk IIIs, which had many skirmishes with the German garrison of Dunkirk. Although a representative element of the brigade joined Third (US) Army for its entry into Czechoslovakia, it was not preceded by LRCs. However, the presence of at least one LRC Mk III in a victory parade in Prague on 31 May 1945 was recorded on camera.

A Canadian cousin

Some LRCs served with First Canadian Army in France, but the Canadians chose to build their own AFV based on the LRC Mk III, the Otter Mk I. Built by General Motors Canada, the final production version of the Otter was powered by a 6-cylinder GM petrol engine; most of the components used were Canadian. Since the Otter was heavier than the LRC Mk III – at 4.8 tons it weighed over a ton more – a larger engine was necessary. Other dimensions included a length of 14ft 9in, a width of 8ft and height of 7ft. Overall, there was only a slight resemblance to the Humber, but armament

A Mk III, probably of 1 Recce, converted to travel by rail to protect trains from guerrilla attack as the British mandate in Palestine nears its end. (TM: 4147/E4)



Also in Palestine, two Mk IIIs of the Corps of Royal Military Police are on patrol, both clearly identified as MP vehicles of HQ Palestine and Transjordan. The 'Royal' prefix was granted in 1946. (Les Jackson)

was identical with a Bren LMG, Boys rifle and smoke discharger. Canadian forces in Italy and North-West Europe used the Otter, of which more than 1,700 were built. Some were supplied to British units in Italy and a number also served with the RAF Regiment, which armed them with a 20mm cannon and twin Browning AA machine guns. At least one Reconnaissance Corps regiment – 1 Recce – used Otters.

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No book has been written solely on the Humber LRC, although it is referred to in many publications on AFVs and, more especially, armoured cars. In these instances, the reference is usually brief and contains only basic information.

And some are still driving. This IIIA belongs to Recce enthusiast Les Jackson. (Les Jackson)

INDEX

Note: letters in **bold** refer to plates and illustrations.

aircraft **40**
armour 6, 9, 14

Bassett, LAC Leslie **40**, **41**
Brett, Lt Col Paddy 29

camouflage
  1940 **8**
  North Africa **D** (27), **E** (31)
  North-West Europe **F** (39)
  RAF Regiment **G** (43)
  standard **A** (7), **B** (15)
Chavasse, Lt Col Kendal 22, 23, 25, 26, 45–46
  his LRC 25, 26, **29**
Chavasse, Lt Cdr Paul 45–46
Cooper, Lt George **36**
Czech forces: 1 Czech Armoured Brigade **B** (15), **46**

Elizabeth, Queen, the Queen Mother **12**
engines and transmission
  Ironside 6, 9–10
  Mk II 13
  Mk III/IIIA 14, **C** (18–19), **23**, **24**

Fisher, Sgt 25
Fordyce, Capt 34–35

George VI, King 25

headlamps 11, **C** (18–19)
helmets **17**, **D** (27)
Humber 5
Humber armoured car (HAC)
  in Italy and Sicily 28, 29, 30, 32
  in North Africa 23
  in North-West Europe 33, 34, 37–38, 41, 44
  overview 23–24
  in Palestine 44
Humber LRC
  comparison table 20
  in desert 21–22, **28**
  numbers produced 20
  used by other nations **B** (15), 20, 46, **46**
Humber LRC Mk I (Ironside; Super Snipe; Humberette) **5**, **A** (7), **8**
  design and development 5–11
  interior **9**, **10**
  plan view **A** (7)
Humber LRC Mk II **13**, **14**, **16**, **17**, **20**, **21**
  design and development 13
  plan view **13**
Humber LRC Mk III/IIIA **22**, **24**, **35**
  cutaway **C** (18–19)
  design and development 14–21
  interior **23**
  in Italy and Sicily **E** (31), **32**, **33**
  in Middle East **25**
  modified as command cars 41, **44**
  in North Africa **D** (27), **29**
  in North-West Europe **36**, **37**, **F** (39), **40**, **41**, **42**, **G** (43), **44**, **45**, **46**
  in Palestine **46**, **47**
  plans **34**
  still in use **47**
  used by Czechs **B** (15)
Humber Light Ambulance 6
Humber Special Saloon 11–12, **11**, **12**, **B** (15)
Humber staff car 6
Humber Utility trucks 6, **25**
Humberette *see* Humber LRC Mk I

Ironside *see* Humber LRC Mk I
Ironside, Gen Sir Edmund 6
Italy 25–32, **E** (31), **32**, **33**

Kinnersley, Lt Col C. H. 44

lights *see* headlamps
Litton, Sgt 38–40

M8 Greyhound 4, 32
maintenance **22**
markings
  air identification **B** (15), **F** (39)
  bridge classification plates **E** (31), **F** (39)
  census marks 8–9, 14, **G** (43)
  divisional badges **E** (31), **F** (39)
  RAF Regiment **G** (43)
  tactical numbers **A** (7), **21**, **E** (31), **F** (39)
May, Cpl 35–36
Medley, Maj 26
Miller, Capt R. T. **36**
Millroy, Sgt 42–44
Montgomery, FM Sir Bernard 6, 22, 30

Normandy and North-West Europe 33–44, **36**, **37**, **F** (39)
North Africa 21–25, **D** (27)

Operation
  Buckland (1944) 30
  Buffalo (1944) 29
  Goodwood (1944) 33
  Husky (1943) 25–28
  Olive (1944) 29–30
  Plunder (1945) 44
  Torch (1942) 22–23
  Veritable (1945) 44
Otter Mk I 46–47

Palestine 44, **46**, **47**

radios *see* wirelesses
RAF Regiment **38**, **40**, **41**, **G** (43), 45, **45**
Reconnaissance Corps
  birth 5
  cap badges **A** (7)
  end 44–45
  LRC numbers and use 20–21
Reconnaissance Corps: units
  1 Recce 23, 29, 44, **46**, 47
  3 Recce 33–34, **F** (39), 41
  4 Recce 23, 24–25, 29, 30
  5 Recce 25–28, 29
  15 Recce 34–35, 37–41, 41–44, **42**, **44**
  43 Recce 34, 36–37, 40, 44
  44 Recce 21, 23, 28, 29, **E** (31), 32
  46 Recce 23, 28, 30
  49 Recce **45**
  50 Recce 21
  51 Recce 22
  53 Recce 34, 35–36, **44**
  56 Recce 22–23, 24, 25, **D** (27), 28, 29, 30–32, **33**
  59 Recce 34, 37
  61 Recce 34
registration marks *see* markings: census marks
Richford, Lt David 42
Robinson, Sgt Robbie 35–36
Roos, Delmar G. 'Barney' 5
Rootes Group 5, 11
Royal Navy 45–46

scout cars 41
SdKfz 231 armoured car 23
Sicily 25–28, **32**
Smith, Sgt 24–25
Standard 5
Standard Beaverette III **4**, 5, 45
stowage **C** (18–19), 20, **23**, **35**, **G** (43)
Super Snipe *see* Humber LRC Mk I

Thomas, Gen Ivor 41, **44**
Thrupp & Maberly 11
transmission *see* engines and transmission
Trigg, L/Cpl E. 26
Tunisia *see* North Africa
tyres 10–11, **10**, **C** (18–19), 21, **35**, 40

vision ports **C** (18–19), 20, **21**, **24**, **35**, **G** (43)

weapons
  aircraft cannon 24
  Boys rifles 16–17, **16**, **17**, **24**
  on Ironside 6, **A** (7)
  machine guns 16, **16**, **C** (18–19), **21**, **22**, **24**, **40**, **44**
  on Mk II 6, 13, **16**, **17**
  on Mk III/IIIA 14–16, **C** (18–19)
  smoke dischargers **16**, 17, **C** (18–19)
Wheatley, Lt Graham 22
White, Tpr W. E. 26–28
Whiting, Cpl 38
Williams, Lt 34
wirelesses 6, 13, **C** (18–19), **20**

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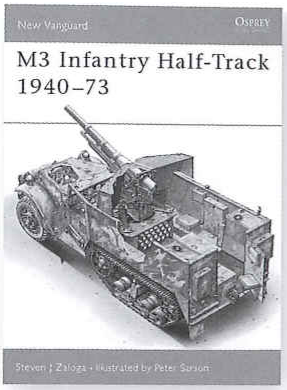

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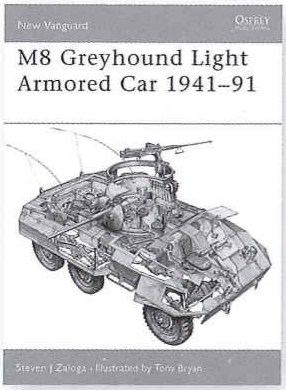

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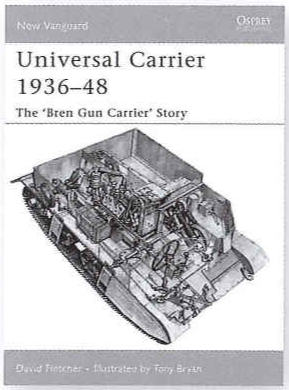

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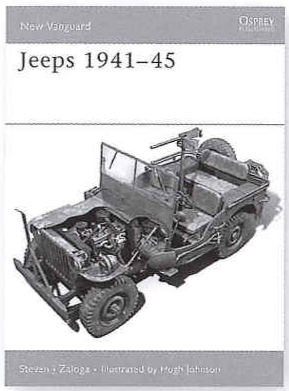

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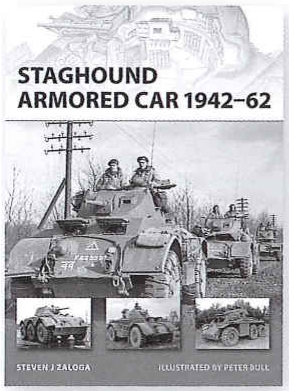

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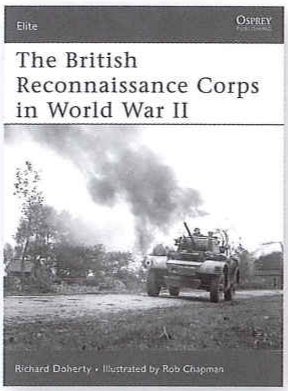

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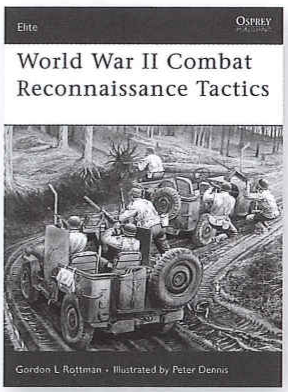

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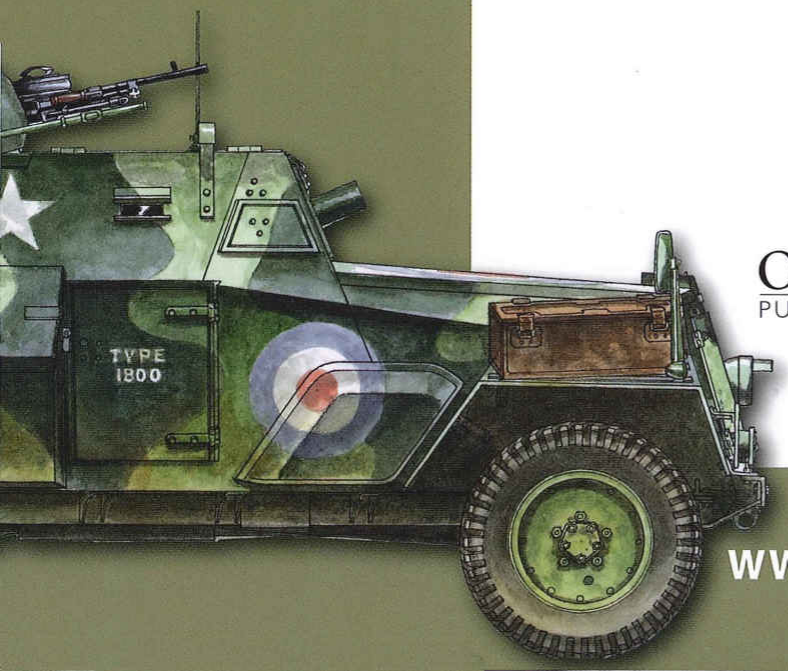

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